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Issue 510

Guitarist

MAY 2024

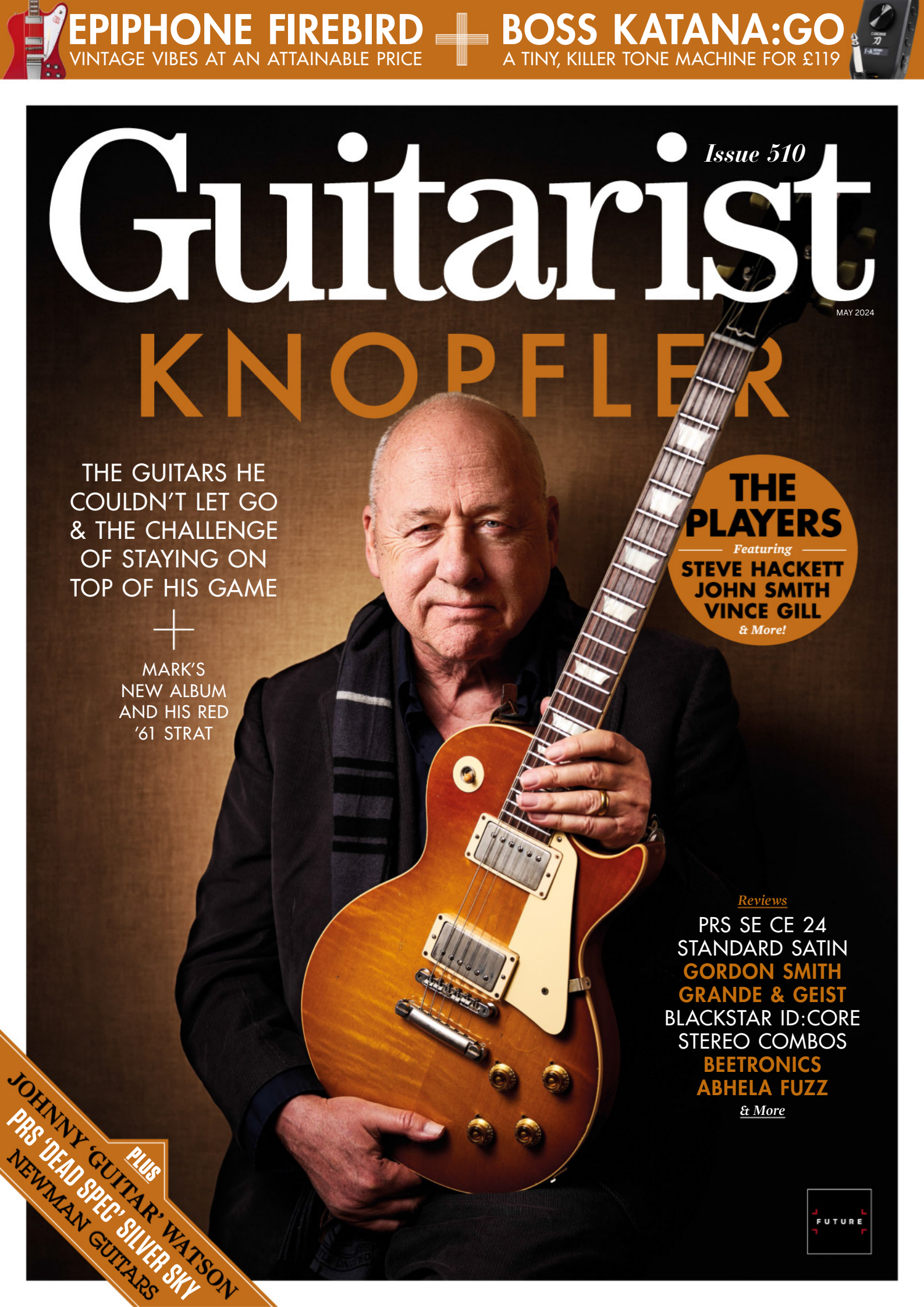
KNOPFLER

THE GUITARS HE COULDN'T LET GO & THE CHALLENGE OF STAYING ON TOP OF HIS GAME

+

MARK'S NEW ALBUM AND HIS RED '61 STRAT

THE PLAYERS
Featuring
STEVE HACKETT
JOHN SMITH
VINCE GILL
& More!

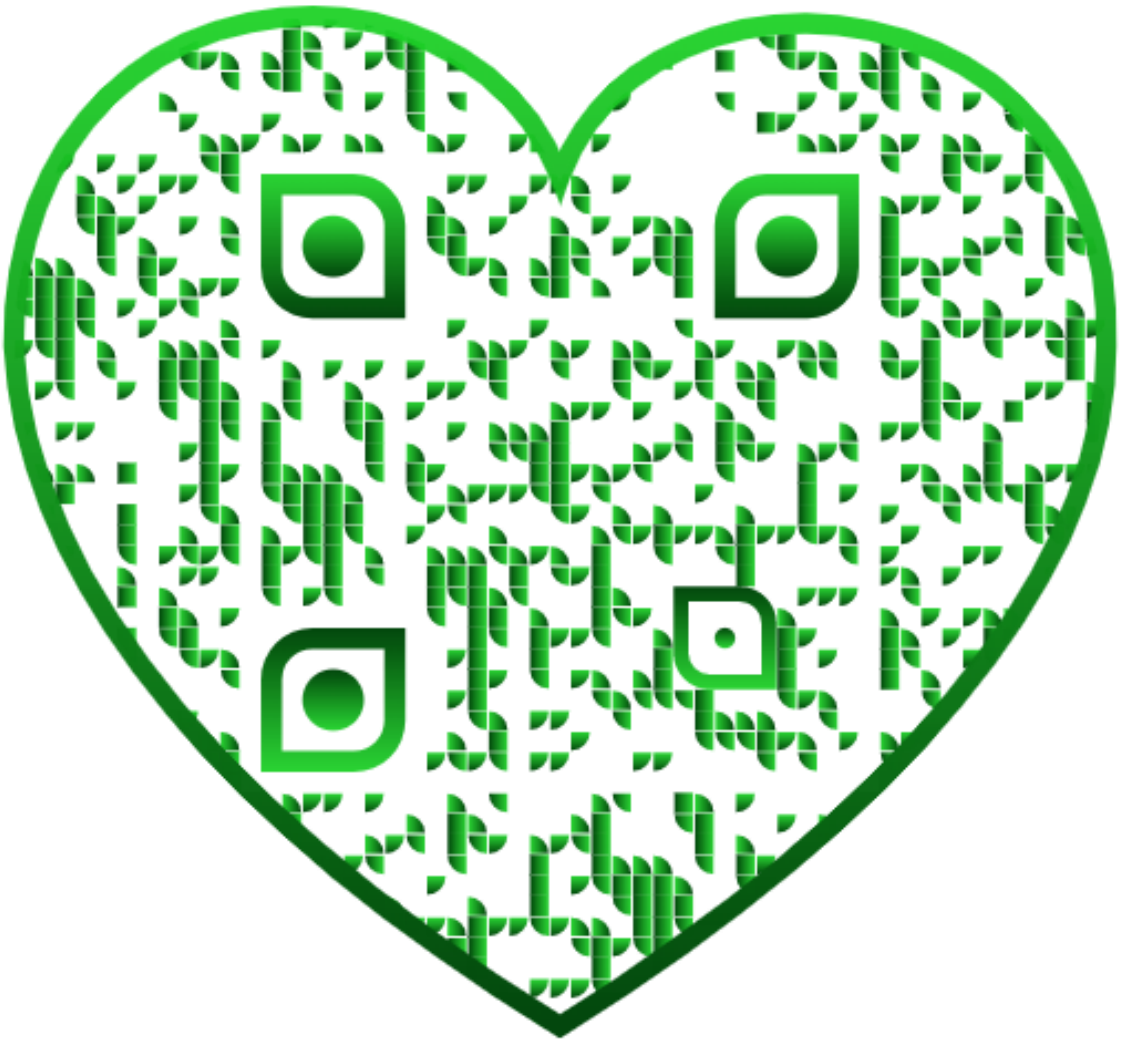


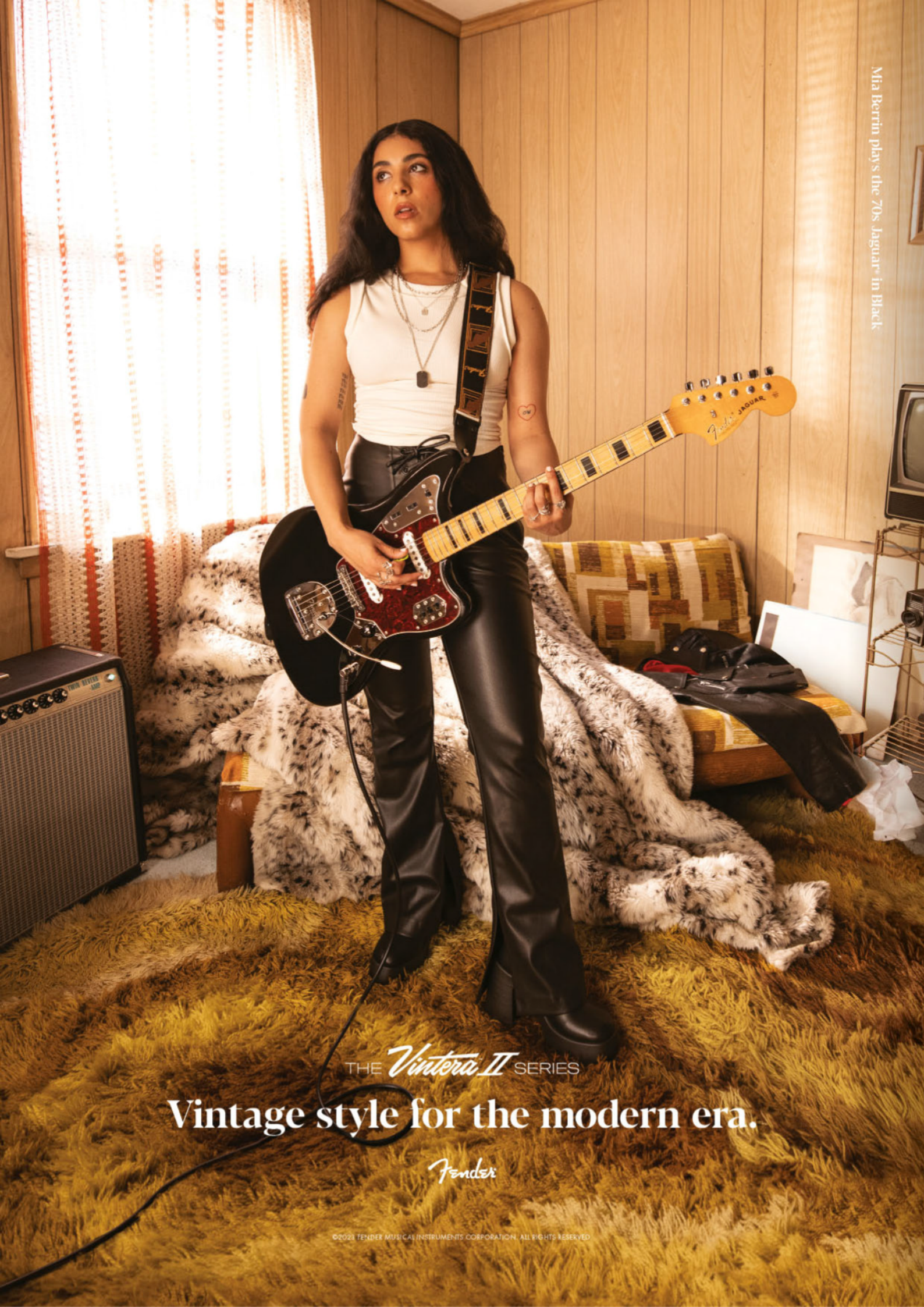
Reviews

PRS SE CE 24 STANDARD SATIN
GORDON SMITH GRANDE & GEIST
BLACKSTAR ID:CORE STEREO COMBOS
BEETRONICS ABHELA FUZZ
& More

PLUS
JOHNNY 'GUITAR' WATSON
PRS 'DEAD SPEC' SILVER SKY
NEWMAN GUITARS

FUTURE





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Guitarist

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Going For A Song

It's so enjoyable to just noodle about on the guitar that it's easy to forget that the origins of the guitar's 20th century boom in popularity lie in songs, not soloing. You can find evidence of this in the tiny frets of Les Paul Customs back in the 50s, built to make moving between jazz chords up and down the neck easy. Likewise, the beautiful Byrds-era Rickenbacker electrics of the early 60s could be seen really as a kind of amplified acoustic guitar, in terms of the intent behind their design, rather than soloists' instruments. I'd argue that even the most famous solos in modern rock, such as Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb*, only work as beautifully as they do because they have as their springboard all the emotional weight and poignant power of the song itself to launch off from.

Therefore, guitarists who focus solely on soloing as opposed to songcraft can miss out on what is really the main reason people listen to music: because they feel moved, compelled and involved by songs. Few guitarists understand that as well as Mark Knopfler (see interview, page 56) whose post-Dire Straits solo career has seen him find yet more depth and subtlety in his songcraft over the years, to the point where crafting lyrics can dominate his working hours. But fans of his playing needn't worry – there are some vintage Knopfler guitar moments on his new album, *One Deep River*. Clearly, the sale of much of his guitar collection hasn't been a farewell to the instrument, though he made some frank and thoughtful reflections about his relationship with the guitar as we chatted. If you love great songs, give the interview a read; you won't find a better, nor more experienced, exponent of what matters in songcraft than Mr Knopfler.

Moving on to unhappier news, everyone at *Guitarist* was saddened to hear that Mike Lewis, long-serving head of Fender's Custom Shop, has died. Mike was an inexhaustible well of knowledge about Fender guitars and so many articles in this magazine were the richer for his insights on everything from Broadcaster pickups to vintage Stratocasters. More importantly, his leadership of the Custom Shop saw its guitars become globally admired as the ultimate expression of Fender's lutherie, a legacy his family and friends can be proud of, along with his many other prior achievements at Fender and in music. Our thoughts and sympathies are with them at this difficult time.

Hope you enjoy the issue and see you next time.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

Go Figure

Boss's new Katana:Go is a startlingly capable little micro amp for little more than £100. Read Nick Guppy's full review over on **p14**

Vince Gill

One of the most capable, tasteful and modest players you could meet, Vince Gill reflects on the Eagles' last flight and old guitars **p70**

Cheap Boutique?

PRS's new SE CE 24 Standard Satin comes in at under £500 but doesn't stint on sounds or playability. Could this be the PRS for all players? **p8**

COVER: COVER IMAGE BY JOBY SESSIONS; ABOVE: VINCE GILL IMAGE BY JOHN SHEARER

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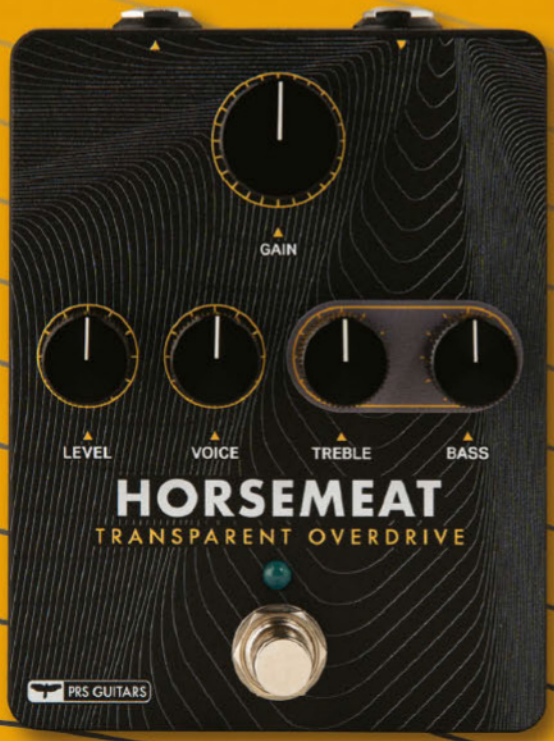

FINDING "THAT" SOUND

"This whole concept started in my studio. When recording, the musicians were looking for tones and textures that we couldn't get straight from the guitar so I started collecting great sounding pedals. Then we started building devices with the help of some friends. That's how the first pedal prototypes were born. We believe the pedals we've created are highly usable, great-sounding pieces of professional gear. A magic pedal makes the pedal board. We're trying to design pedals that make the board and stay on it".

– Paul Reed Smith

PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS

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Contents

REGULARS

030 Gas Supply
032 Fretbuzz
034 New Music
036 Tones Behind The Tracks
040 Opinion
044 Substitute
046 Feedback
106 Subscribe
114 Bought & Sold
116 The Mod Squad
120 Nitty Gritty
124 Talking Loud
130 Next Month

FEATURES

050 John Smith
056 Mark Knopfler
070 Vince Gill
076 Pioneers: Johnny 'Guitar' Watson
108 Blueprint: Newman Guitars

NEW GEAR

008 **PRS** SE CE 24 Standard Satin
014 **Boss** Katana:Go
018 **Epiphone** Inspired By Gibson 1963 Firebird I & V
024 **Crazy Tube Circuits** Hi Power
026 **Beetronics** Abelha Tropical Fuzz
028 **PRS** 'Dead Spec' Silver Sky
082 **Gordon Smith** Grande & Geist
094 **Blackstar** ID:Core V4 Stereo 10, Stereo 20 & Stereo 40 combos
102 **Boss** BP-1W Booster/Preamp & IR-2 Amp & Cabinet

TECHNIQUES

126 Blues Headlines with Richard Barrett

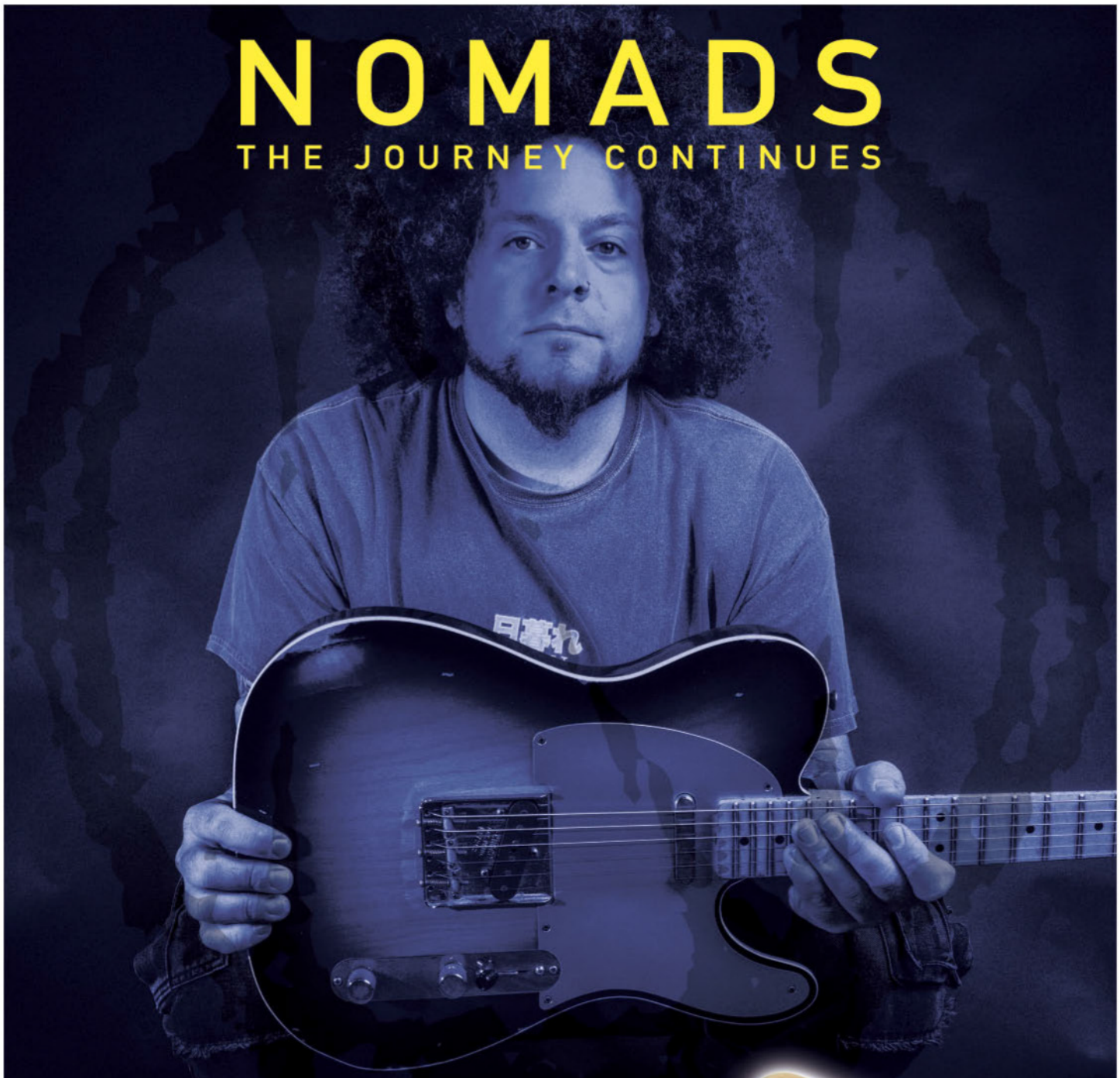
VIDEO

Please note: to enjoy all of the video content in this issue, you will need a WiFi connection

The Pick. TAP TO GET THE LATEST GUITAR NEWS

NOMADS

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES



"I've always loved using Telecaster tones on my recordings. Nomads get super heavy without any unwanted spikiness but also respect the early '50s Tele tones for all the lower gain chime and spank that I love."

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BEA

Rabea Massaad signature Telecaster set

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Bare Knuckle

PRS SE CE 24 STANDARD SATIN
£499

WHAT IS IT? Hugely affordable mahogany-bodied satin-finished CE 24: PRS's new start-up guitar

Satin Stunner

Hot on the heels of the classic CE 24 launching in the SE line for 2024, this new satin Standard version loses the bling and drops the price. Yes, please!

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

It's hard to second-guess PRS these days. Having only just released a trio of new SEs for its 2024 line-up, including the Swamp Ash Special and CE 24 (featured in issue 506), the company has released yet another one: a Standard Satin version of the still-fresh SE CE 24.

PRS fans will know that 'Standard' refers to an all-mahogany body, rather than the more commonly used mahogany back with a figured maple cap. This all-mahogany style dates right back to the first PRS guitars of 1985. Originally, there was just the maple-topped Custom and the less expensive all-mahogany 'PRS Guitar', which became the Standard around 1987. The genus of this new SE whizzes back to the following year when PRS's first bolt-on was launched, the Classic Electric, which soon became the CE.

There have been plenty of Standards over the years, of course, including a few with satin finishes, and currently the mainly Indonesian-made SE line boasts the McCarty 594 Singlecut Standard, the

1

1. Unlike the USA-made CE 24 that has a natural headstock face, the SE uses what PRS calls a 'Black Bakelite' facing. The tuners are non-locking, too, unlike the low-mass locking types on the USA model

Standard 24-08 and the Hollowbody Standard (also available with piezo). But this new model is unique in that both the neck and body have a very light satin finish. And while the glossy maple-topped SE CE 24 lists at £695, this new version drops that to just £499 (including a gigbag). We're reliably informed that dealers will probably be selling it closer to £450: it's the lowest-cost PRS guitar.

To be honest, at that price we wondered if we might get a bag of bits and some instructions... but, no, the CE 24 Standard Satin is fit to go from the off and any savings are clearly down to the finish type, the lack of a maple-veneered top and, we'd wager, a few trimmed margins.

Available in three translucent colours, our review sample is coined Turquoise, although 'Forest Green' might have been more accurate. Like the SE Swamp Ash Special, you can clearly see that the 44mm deep body is three pieces, and while the jointing is immaculate, on the treble side you can see that things are slightly mismatched. That said, the machining and sanding is superb and with this light, slightly open-pore finish there's nowhere to hide, unlike a coloured, opaque gloss. In fact, plenty of us might argue that this style looks and feels classier, more expensive even. Just remember, though, that a finish such as this will mark and ding easily. There's no binding, like we see on the other glossed SE Standards, the top's edges aren't radiused, either, unlike the back, and we have the same lightly dished 'shallow violin' carve with a light ribcage cutaway.

Aside from the body change, then, everything else is identical to the glossed model: the same 635mm (25-inch) maple neck with scarf-jointed headstock, a 24-fret rosewood fretboard, the generic enclosed PRS logo'd non-locking tuners, the all-steel 'cast' vibrato, a pair of double black 85/15 'S' humbuckers, controlled with a three-position toggle switch, master volume and tone (with a pull switch to voice PRS's usual partial splits). The pearloid solid bird inlays are retained, even though dot inlays might have suited this slightly more lowly start-up style a little more.

We're scratching our heads a little. How can such a guitar be so perfectly crafted and sound so good for this money?

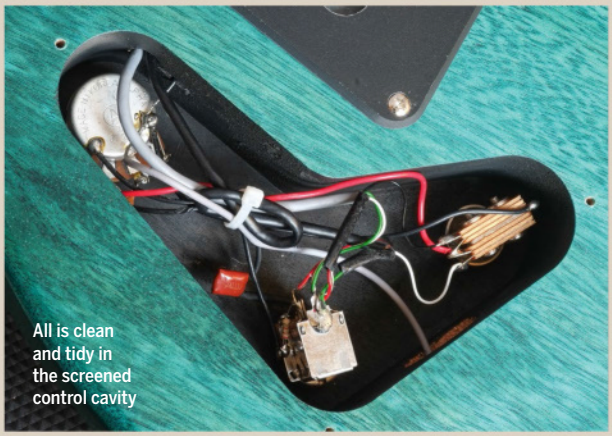
2. PRS's SE and USA-made S2 use this cast (as opposed to machined) two-piece all-steel vibrato. Don't feel short-changed, though – it's a great design with push-in, tension-adjustable arm and is set up here with four tension springs

UNDER THE HOOD

Any changes to the control circuit? Let's take a look…

As you might expect, the control circuit here is exactly the same as the gloss-finish SE CE 24 using an Alpha 'Made in Korea' 500k audio taper volume pot and an unmarked tone (also 500k nominally) with its pull-switch to switch both pickups to single-coil mode. But these are partial coil-splits, so the screw coil isn't fully dumped to ground, like a standard coil-split, achieved with a 2.2kohms resistor on the bridge pickup and a 1.1k on the neck. The tone cap is valued at .033µf and the volume has a 108pF capacitor for its treble bleed circuit.

Unlike some PRS pickups, the 85/15 'S' humbuckers are four-conductor, so there's plenty of potential for expanding the wiring here if you're handy with a soldering iron. PRS describes the 85/15 'S' humbuckers as "uncovered pickups with clarity and extended high and low-end – perfect for modern applications". Our bridge pickup measures 7.63kohms (5.16k when split) and the neck is 7.04k (4.37k when split).



All is clean and tidy in the screened control cavity

Made in Indonesia, these PRS-designed 81/15 'S' humbuckers aim to replicate the USA-made versions

3. With the tone control down you're in humbucker mode, but pull it up and both humbuckers are simultaneously split to single coil

4. Like the gloss-finished SE CE 24, the satin version uses 85/15 'S' pickups with their double black bobbins. As per the name, it's a 24-fret guitar, like the original from 1988. There's no SE CE 22... as yet!

Feel & Sounds

At 3.37kg (7.4lb) it's virtually identical in weight to the SE CE 24 and a great weight for a solidbody. As we noted in that previous review, the neck could probably do with a rub with a light abrasive or 0000 wire wool to burnish it to a more played-in silky smooth satin, which would elevate it further, along with just a little more fingerboard-edge rolling. But there's nothing wrong here.

The Wide Thin neck profile suggests some kind of shredder's neck, but it doesn't feel like that in the hand. Instead, we have a generous nut width and string spacing – 43.23mm and 36mm respectively – and a depth of 21mm at the 1st fret, 23mm by the 12th. It's a pretty classic C profile, although the relaxed shoulders do make it feel 'thinner' than it actually is. Think 'all-rounder' and you're not far off. Typically, the medium jumbo frets are perfectly installed and the setup is bang-

For any player, at any level, needing to cover a lot of sounds, this really takes some beating

5. Another change from the USA style is the more Fender-like bolt-on join (also used on the SE Silver Sky and the SE Swamp Ash Special), which means the bass-side cutaway has a slightly different shape compared with the USA CE 24 model

on. It plays superbly, holds its tuning well, even with some pretty vigorous vibrato use. We'd take it on a gig as is.

The 85/15 'S' humbuckers continue the impression of a well turned-out machine aimed at very mainstream use that, in typical PRS style, offers well-voiced single-coil sounds and bigger humbucker sounds that sit nicely between vintage and modern, both in terms of sound and output. Just like the original PRS proposition, it sits rather beautifully in that middle ground between a Les Paul and a Stratocaster.

Compared with an original alder-bodied Classic Electric, the SE doesn't quite capture the more vintage-y depth and vibe of the neck humbucker, it's a little fuller and more balanced, while the bridge has less of the Classic Electric's mid-focus. There are big rock voices here, but even with some throaty gain there's welcome clarity.

Pull back the volume and a rootsier sound emerges, plus you'll find some smooth jangle that removes a little of the new-string sparkle in a good way, while the partial splits move easily into the single-coil realm – not as authentic as the SE Silver Sky but more than usable. And whether it's the lack of body finish or the material, there's a very woody character here; the sort of thing that attracted this writer to those original CEs back in the day.

We're scratching our heads a little here. How can such a lowly guitar be so perfectly crafted and sound so versatile and good for this money?

Verdict

With PRS having only just launched the first-ever SE CE 24, this second Standard version almost seems an afterthought, rather than a carefully considered marketing move. Save for its all-mahogany satin finished body, it's the same guitar – and if the less-posh style ticks your box, you can happily save yourself nearly £200. Surely, then, its introduction will dilute the sales of the glossed maple-topped version?

But that's not our problem. Instead, we now have a new entry point into PRS world that, on paper, is equally valid for any youngster to start their journey with, or as a spare or modding platform for a more experienced player. The thing is, as is, for any player, at any level, needing to cover a lot of sounds, this really takes some beating: the pared-down essence of PRS, if you like, and a guitar we really can't fault. Try one of these before someone realises they've made a mistake with the price. G

PRS SE CE 24 STANDARD SATIN

PRICE: £499 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on
BODY: 3-piece mahogany with 'shallow violin' top carve
NECK: Maple, wide-thin profile, bolt-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/43.23mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'old school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 24, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS 85/15 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coil, double black bobbins); 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (w/ pull switch to simultaneously coil-split both humbuckers)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.37/7.4
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: Maple-topped, gloss-finished SE CE 24 (£695). Other SE Standards: McCarty 594 Singlecut Standard (£899), Standard 24-08 (£699) and Hollowbody Standard (£1,035), also available with piezo (£1,399). USA-made CE 24 (£2,775); 24- or 22-fret S2 Satin Standard (£1,629)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISHES: Turquoise (as reviewed), Charcoal, Vintage Cherry – satin open-pore body finish; satin neck back

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Guitarist GOLD

10/10

PROS Stripped-down vibe but with the crisp execution we've come to expect from the modern PRS SE, not to mention expansive sounds; that price!

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1-C CLEAN CHORUS
STAGE FEEL
CHARGE
KATANA:GO
ON
OFF

BOSS KATANA:GO
£119

WHAT IS IT? Boss's latest (and smallest) addition to the popular Katana range – a guitar/bass headphones amplifier

Pocket Rocket

For its latest addition, Boss has crammed a full Katana amplifier into a tiny headphone-amp format – and its long list of features and tones makes it practically irresistible

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

The near-universal popularity of Boss's Katana range shows no sign of slowing down, with a full range of affordable digital amplification covering every need – from big stages and arenas, to pubs, clubs and the home. The latest product to bear the Katana name, the Katana:Go headphone amplifier, is the smallest yet and likely to become another success story for Boss.

The Katana:Go is small enough to fit in your pocket and exquisitely designed, with the same attention to detail lavished on all Boss products. As you might expect, it's not exactly bristling with knobs and switches, and yet the various small buttons and volume-control wheel handle everything you might need, and they're intuitive to use so after a while you don't really need to look at them any more.

On the lower side, from a plugged-in perspective, you'll find an on/off switch with a charge indicator LED that glows red when the battery is low, amber when charging, and green when fully charged. Two more button switches manage the Katana:Go's Bluetooth connection and a Stage Feel 3D ambience effect.

On the opposite side, nearest the player when plugged in, there's a Bank Up/Down switch that also operates the tuner, together with three patch selection buttons labelled A, B and C. On the top face is a small monochrome display and the volume control, with a 3mm stereo jack socket for your headphones and a USB-C socket on the back face. The integral jack plug is hinged and folds to accommodate angled and straight jack sockets, covering practically all guitars. Thoughtful soft pads on the underside protect your guitar's finish.

The key to the Katana:Go's power is software, rather than hardware. A specially designed version of Boss's Tone Studio app connects via Bluetooth and lets you access the five famous Katana amp voices, each with a second variation. EQ controls include Bass, Middle, Treble, Presence and Cabinet Resonance, this last one with a choice of Deep, Vintage and Modern modes.

There are dozens of effects to choose from, covering all the bases you might need in the overdrive, distortion, modulation, delay and reverb departments, plus seven different signal chains to arrange them in. There's also not one but two parametric EQs

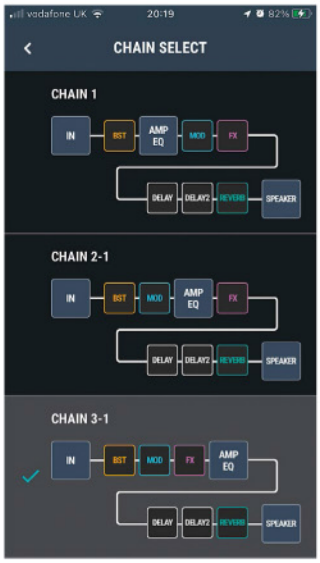
1. The jack plug is on a hinge that rotates through about 135 degrees, easily accommodating angled and straight jack sockets while folding flat against the case for easy storage

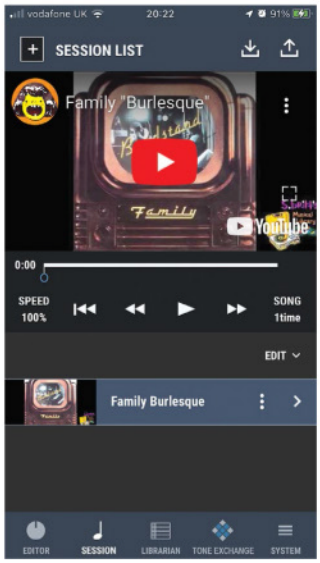
2. The Katana:Go has 30 patches arranged in 10 banks of three that are accessed by soft-touch switches on the side of the case. The switch that selects Bank Up/Down also operates the integral tuner

and a noise gate, with yet another global EQ lurking in the system settings. The Katana:Go also unleashes 3D audio in its clever Stage Feel mode, which gives you the impression of a band playing behind you, either in a hall or a studio, with your virtual amp in front or behind, plus a custom setting you can tweak.

You can use the Tone Studio's Session List feature to load and play music from your mobile device or YouTube, and arrange songs in your favourite order, as well as assigning your favourite patches to play along with them. Roland account holders can make full use of the Boss Tone Exchange to browse and download from thousands of Liveset patches uploaded by users from all over the world; the Katana:Go is compatible with Livesets created on the Mk1 and Mk2 Katana amps.

Are we finished? Nowhere near. This feature-packed device also offers high-quality USB streaming and recording to your mobile device or desktop, is compatible with the Boss wireless expression pedal and footswitch, and operates in either Guitar or Bass mode.





In Use

The Katana:Go's onboard memory holds 30 patches (or 60, if you count the bass mode) that are arranged in 10 banks of three. Soft-touch button switches on the side nearest the player scroll through the banks and select the individual patches, with a useful tuner function if you push in the Bank Up/Down switch.

In guitar mode, you can pick or choose from Acoustic, Clean, Crunch, Lead or Brown amp voices, each with a variation and a regular EQ layout. Swapping into bass mode gives you a choice of bass-optimised Vintage, Modern or Flat amp voices, each

3. The concentric circles on the volume wheel add a touch of class, while a small mono display lets you know what's happening with patch and MIDI information

4. Within the Editor section of Boss's Tone Studio app you'll find this Chain Select screen (far left), which offers a number of chain layout templates to choose from, while the Session screen (right) is where you can add songs from your music library or YouTube, adjust the speed of the track, and also add markers to change the memory presets/guitar sounds automatically

5. Headphones connectivity is thoughtfully placed on the rear of the case, together with a USB-C socket for connection to a desktop or standard charger. There's enough level to drive regular headphones as well as semi-pro and pro types, which often need slightly more power

6. On the other side of the case you'll find an on/off switch with a battery condition indicator that glows red when the battery is about to expire, amber when charging and green for go. Two other button switches operate the Bluetooth connection and the Katana:Go's Stage Feel 3D ambient effect

with a Shape option, while the amp EQ defaults to a semi-parametric configuration, with swept low and high mid controls and shelving treble and bass.

We used our regular Strat and Les Paul guitars, together with standard mobile phone wired earbuds and a decent mid-priced closed ear studio-type headphone for comparison. The 'out of the box' EQ sounded somewhat fizzy with too much top-end for the small earbuds, but it was warmer and more relaxing to listen to on the studio headphones. The Katana:Go's global EQ is the solution here, making it quick and easy to dial the amp into your favourite pair of speakers.

The effects are the same as the larger full-sized Katana amplifiers and there are dozens to choose from, including popular staples such as chorus, flange and phasing alongside wilder options such as the Slow Gear reverse effect and the Slicer, one of our personal favourites and a brilliant source for creative chord playing. Delays feature another favourite, the SDE3000 model. Boosts and overdrives include well-known Boss hallmarks such as the HM-2 and Metalzone, alongside other famous effects such as the Centa OD, Rat and imaginatively named Muff Fuzz. They all sound great with a little careful editing, especially when filtered through the Stage Feel surround sound, which puts you and your virtual amp in a hall or room with streamed music from your favourite band coming from behind while you're centre stage. The quality of the Bluetooth stream is excellent with practically zero latency; the illusion can be quite convincing.

The technology on offer is so much fun and so inspiring – the Katana:Go is a steal at the asking price

Verdict

We've said on more than one occasion recently that digital amplification for the guitar has now arrived at the point where the differences between analogue and digital are so small they're not worth arguing over. More so than the high-end devices that tend to get the attention, the Katana range has arguably been the most disruptive, taking over the highly competitive mid ground with great tone and effects that practically everyone can afford. The technology that's on offer in the Katana:Go is so much fun and so inspiring, it's a steal at the asking price.

BOSS KATANA:GO GUITAR/BASS HEADPHONES AMPLIFIER

PRICE: £119
ORIGIN: Vietnam
TYPE: Digital modelling headphones amplifier
DIMENSIONS: 45 (w) x 83 (d) x 25mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 067/0.15
CASE: Plastic
CONNECTIONS: Single instrument plug, stereo headphones jack, USB-C socket for desktop/charger connection
CHANNELS: 30 slots organised in 10 banks of 3
CONTROLS: Volume control, bank up/down/tuner switch, A/B/C patch select buttons, Bluetooth button, on/off button, stage mode select button
FOOTSWITCH: Optional Blue tooth footswitch/expression pedal
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Bluetooth audio streaming, USB audio recording, integral tuner
POWER: Integral rechargeable battery pack
OPTIONS: EV-1WL wireless expression pedal (£163); FS-1WL wireless footswitch (£112)
RANGE OPTIONS: Katana Air stereo wireless desktop combo (£499)

Roland UK
www.boss.info

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Impressive amp tones can be dialled in to suit all kinds of headphones; USB recording and audio streaming from Tone Studio app; remote control storage

CONS Side-mounted performance switches aren't so accessible depending on the guitar type and whether you're left- or right-handed; not immediately great on some headphones, but the powerful EQ can correct that in seconds

EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON 1963 FIREBIRD I
£1,349

WHAT IS IT? Affordable remake of the classic early 60s reverse-bodied, single-pickup 'bird

EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON 1963 FIREBIRD V
£1,699

WHAT IS IT? The flagship 'bird with dual pickups, four controls and Maestro Vibrola

Birds Of A Feather

Two of Gibson's most controversial designs, reimagined and rebranded with Epiphone's moniker. Do they promise the 'Cream' of the crop or a 'Winter' of discontent?

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Phil Barker

Well does this reviewer recall hearing Cream's live version of the blues classic *Sitting On Top Of The World* on the band's *Goodbye* album. Clapton spits out reams of notes with a huge distorted tone that it turns out was his 1964 sunburst Gibson Firebird I. Just as memorable was first catching the infectious swagger of Johnny Winter's *Rock And Roll Hoochie Koo*, most likely played on Johnny's own 1964 Firebird, this time a white model V.

While Winter made a Firebird the main staple of his career, Clapton only stayed with his for the final Cream tour and on a few Blind Faith shows the following year. EC's use of the Firebird inspired Gary Moore and Joe Bonamassa to purchase identical models, and it's likely that many a Firebird lover took Winter's fiery licks and slicing tone as inspiration. Gibson later produced limited-edition runs of both guitars.

Epiphone

Plugging the Firebird I into our 20-watt combo it's immediately apparent that this dual-rail mini-humbucker breathes fire

We'll spare you the full history lesson, but in the face of Fender's success with its futuristic designs Gibson brought in auto industry designer Raymond Dietrich to see if his genius as a motor vehicle architect for brands such as Packard, Studebaker and Lincoln would transfer to the guitar. Visually, it most certainly did, but commercially the result was more akin to Ford's ill-fated Edsel model (not a Dietrich design). Even when Kalamazoo undertook a radical rethink of the Firebird in 1965, partly due to threats from Fender regarding headstock and body shape infringements, by 1969 the range had fizzled out.

Although Gibson has reintroduced the model in various guises over the years, with none in the current mainstream line-up (you'll find some Murphy Lab ones but for mega bucks), it falls to Epiphone to fly the flag for this largely undersung guitar.

The Firebird I with its single bridge pickup and wrapover bridge would be one of the simplest guitars that Gibson ever made were it not for some highly unusual features. Like all reverse-body Firebirds it features a neck-through-body design with two body 'wings' glued into V-shaped recesses milled from each side of the body end of this nine-piece multi-laminate. Using five mahogany lengths interspersed with four slim walnut strips for additional strength, it's a complex build that also led to the model's stepped body, onto which pickups and bridges are mounted. It also means that the pickguard, with its natty Firebird emblem, butts neatly up to the step's lower edge. On the base model the fingerboard was unbound rosewood with pearloid dots, and on our Chinese-built Epiphone it's the same but using Indian laurel.

Firebird pickups buck the usual trend, too. Those fitted here are US-made Gibson Alnico V 'buckers, which, although appearing like regular mini-humbuckers but without adjustable polepieces, are actually quite different inside. A Firebird pickup comprises a magnet set in the centre of each of the two bobbins with

1. With its single pickup and wrap-around 'lightning bar' tailpiece, operationally the Firebird is one of Gibson's simplest guitars. But that pickup is a poky beast, and the tailpiece is compensated to help with intonation

2. The laminated neck assembly runs the length of the entire guitar and facilitates the Firebird's signature stepped body, onto which the pickups and bridge are mounted. Note the pickguard, which neatly butts up against the centre 'step'

3

the windings effectively surrounding them, as opposed to the mini- or standard humbucker where a single magnet is centred underneath both coils. That's it in a nutshell, and what it means for the guitar's tone we'll get to shortly.

The Firebird I's bridge is the wrap-around 'lightning bar' style as found on various 60s Gibsons. With its six raised compensated ridges it's a fair compromise between an adjustable tune-o-matic and the more basic wrap-around of the Les Paul Junior.

Which brings us to the tuners. Dietrich didn't want a line of buttons sticking out to spoil his reverse Strat-style headstock design, so opted for Kluson's rear-facing banjo machines instead. This wasn't a bad move from a practicality point of view, either, as it allowed easier access to the keys than would have been possible had the buttons been lined up facing the floor, as the reverse design might have implied. The downside is that they are huge and heavy, and on an already lengthy headstock the tendency when hanging on a strap is for the neck to dive.

Speaking of which, Firebirds have three strap buttons: one on the body end, one on the top shoulder, and one attached to the heel. Due to the body's shape you can't lean the guitar against an amp or it will tip over sideways, and we wouldn't give great odds on the headstock surviving such a fall. A hanging stand, adjustable for height, is your best bet here.

With single volume and tone pots, electronically the Firebird I is as basic as it gets. The components are all top quality, though, with CTS pots, a Sprague capacitor and Switchcraft jack. And with all constructional aspects the same, bar the bound laurel fingerboard with trapeze inlays, it's only the Firebird V's long Maestro Vibrola with tune-o-matic bridge, plus an extra pickup with twin volume and tone pots, that distinguish the two guitars.

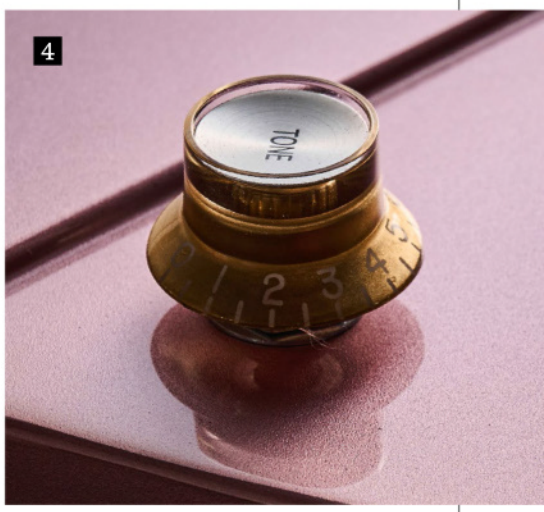
As with all Epiphones we've played recently it's hard to fault the build and finish. The Heather Poly of our Firebird I packs a real statement, while the V's Ember Red look is classy and timeless.

Feel & Sounds

These are big guitars, and getting used to their playing geometry can take a while. With no top horn it feels like the entire fingerboard is at the player's disposal, and despite the Firebird's size and odd shape, sitting down to play, everything seems in the right place. Due to its hefty Vibrola tailpiece, extra pickup and controls, the Firebird V is a weightier lump than its junior sibling. But this will certainly make it balance better on a strap.

3. Ray Dietrich could have stipulated tuners on the top or the bottom of the Firebird's reverse headstock. Instead, he opted for Kluson's rear-mounted banjo-style machines to keep the design looking elegant

4. This detail shot of the Firebird I's tone control highlights the body's raised step, a clever nine-piece laminate of mahogany and walnut



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5. With the huge swathe of nickel plate and Ember Red finish (used by Ford, Chevrolet and others), Ray Dietrich imparted a real automotive vibe to his Firebird design. The Maestro 'lyre' Vibrola is mated to an ABR-1 style tune-o-matic bridge

Plugging the Firebird I into our Laney Lionheart 20-watt combo it's immediately apparent that this dual-rail mini-humbucker breathes fire. Johnny Winter said he loved Firebirds because sonically they sit somewhere between Fender and Gibson, and our single-pickup model certainly has the vibe of an extra beefy Telecaster about it. It snarls and seems to suit a driving tone that can be backed off to clean up. Also, the single tone control is your best friend for darkening the tone (which Clapton surely did on *Sitting On Top Of The World*).

While the Maestro Vibrola has something of a reputation as a tone sucker, we spotted no evidence of that on the Firebird V

6. A rear shot of the Firebird V's headstock showing its massive Kluson 'Planetary' banjo tuners. They are easy to get to but can weigh down the headstock

While the Maestro Vibrola has something of a reputation as a tone sucker, we spotted no evidence of that here on the Firebird V. The bridge pickup matched that of the Firebird I's in size and tone, while the neck humbucker is not exactly Strat-y but certainly moving in that, or perhaps a DeArmond-loaded Gretsch's, direction. The 'both pickups on' setting provides clear and clanky sounds and, of course, everything can be sweetened up

using the tone pots. Light waggles of the vibrato bar add pleasing dips to single notes and a lovely shimmer to chords.

Verdict

The recent joint ventures between Epiphone and Gibson's Custom Shop have produced some stunning guitars of late, and this pair of Firebirds is right up there with the best. Of course, what such collaborations also do is whack up the bottom line somewhat, and at £1,699 the Firebird V is closing in on Gibson's own price points. We don't think it's unfair for what you get, which is some of our favourite instruments of late, and perhaps we'll simply have to get used to it (ask yourself what you paid for half a pound of butter a year or two ago!).

Aside from the pricing issue, however, there's nothing we don't love about these guitars. They look fabulous, play really nicely right out of their huge leather-look black cases, and sound phenomenal. Were we to play one live, though, we'd definitely fit strap locks and use the shoulder-mounted button to aid balance.

If it came to a choice? It's tricky, as the Ember Red V is a fabulous beast, but for its unadulterated simplicity and staggeringly good looks, we'd opt for the Firebird I. Okay Ginger, "one, two, three..." G

7. The Firebird's neck heel deftly moulds into the body, and you can clearly see here that the stepped body feature extends round the back as well. Note the strap buttons: one on the heel, the other shoulder-mounted. We recommend strap locks!

EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON 1963 FIREBIRD I

PRICE: £1,349 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Reverse solidbody electric
BODY: 2x 'wings' of solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany and walnut 9-piece laminate, neck-through-body design
SCALE LENGTH: 628.65mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: 43mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian Laurel, 305mm (12") radius, dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Wrap-around 'lightning bar' bridge/tailpiece, Kluson banjo-style Planetary rear-mounted tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 1x Alnico V Epiphone Firebird mini-humbucker, single volume and tone controls, CTS pots, Mallory capacitor, Switchcraft output jack
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Epiphone Inspired by Gibson Firebird V (as reviewed)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Heather Poly (as reviewed), Silver Mist, Inverness Green

Epiphone
www.epiphone.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS A fabulous-looking guitar that was decades ahead of its time; brilliant tones from one pickup; simplicity of use; great to play; killer image

CONS Can be neck heavy; you'll need strap locks and a very large boot/trunk; it's on the pricey side

EPIPHONE INSPIRED BY GIBSON 1963 FIREBIRD V

PRICE: £1,699 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Reverse solidbody electric
BODY: 2x 'wings' of solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany and walnut 9-piece laminate, neck-through-body design
SCALE LENGTH: 628.65mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: 43mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound Indian Laurel, 305mm (12") radius, trapeze inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone ABR, Maestro Vibrola vibrato tailpiece, Kluson banjo-style Planetary rear-mounted tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Alnico V Epiphone Firebird mini-humbuckers, individual volume and tone controls, CTS pots, Mallory capacitors, Switchcraft output jack
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.0/8.8
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Epiphone Inspired by Gibson Firebird I (as reviewed)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Ember Red (as reviewed), Frost Blue

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Almost unbeatable in the cool stakes; a fantastic, incredibly versatile set of tones; great to play; better balanced than the Firebird I

CONS You'll need strap locks and a very large boot/trunk, and it's pushing Gibson, price wise... otherwise hard to fault

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS HI POWER
£235

WHAT IS IT? Dual-drive pedal channelling Hiwatt amp and Colorsound pedal sounds

Flying Hi

Crazy Tube Circuits presents David Gilmour-favoured amp and drive flavours together in one pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Olly Curtis

1. Power Boost or Overdriver? A drive pedal before such a thing was given a name, the Gary Hurst-designed Power Boost was an 18-volt orange pedal that was revamped as the Overdriver in 1971, grey with nine-volt powering
2. The B/L/N (Brilliant/Linked/Normal) switch selects the Hiwatt amp's input channel. Linked represents the sound you'd get by connecting two channels on the amp with a patch lead
3. This 103/504 switch refers to two different Hiwatt amps: the DR103 is a 100-watt amp, while the DR504 is a 50-watt amp
4. The send and return loop allows you to add in other pedals or use the boost and amp sections as separate entities using a switcher. If you're a Gilmour fan, you'll know he used the Colorsound Boost along with a Big Muff, so this gives you two options for Muff placement to find what best suits you

Crazy Tube Circuits has a penchant for creating pedals that pair classic amp and drive pedal sounds. The latest is the Hi Power, which offers tones from Hiwatt amps with a recreation of the Colorsound Power Boost pedal, a combination that David Gilmour was known to use back in the day, notably on the *Wish You Were Here* album. The two sections of the pedal are independently footswitchable and the boost comes before the amp, but there is added flexibility with a send and return loop between the two.

The Boost section has a toggle switch that lets you choose between the sound of the 18-volt Power Boost or the slightly later nine-volt Overdriver version. A Volume knob sets the gain and there's a Master knob for output volume, plus Bass and Treble knobs with which you can temper the boost/drive, which comes with a glassy top-end. There are various degrees of boost and drive to be had, although higher reaches of the Volume knob add a fuzzy edge to proceedings until it gets raucously fuzzy up full. It's here you'll notice the most difference between PWR and ODR settings, the latter being smoother and not quite as rampantly in-yer-face.

The amp section also has similar Volume and Master knobs, but you get a full quartet of amp-style EQ knobs. A toggle switch lets you choose Normal channel, Brilliant channel or a combination of the two working together for added gain. Starting with the recreation of a DR103 100-watt amp, there's really good dynamic response as the amp reacts to your playing across a range of authentic-sounding Hiwatt tones from clean to everything-on-10 crunch, the Master knob building in the sound of power amp distortion. You also get the choice to toggle switch to a DR504 50-watt version, which eschews the former's high headroom and greater dynamic response for more compression and gain. Both sides of the pedal work fine independently, but together the boost seems to be the perfect complement to the amp, pushing it into some familiar clear yet smooth lead tones.

Verdict

Another nicely thought out addition to Crazy Tube Circuits' twin-pedal range, the Hi Power has an obvious appeal to Gilmour fans, but from a wider perspective it combines two classic tonal flavours that are rare in pedal form.

CRAZY TUBE CIRCUITS HI POWER

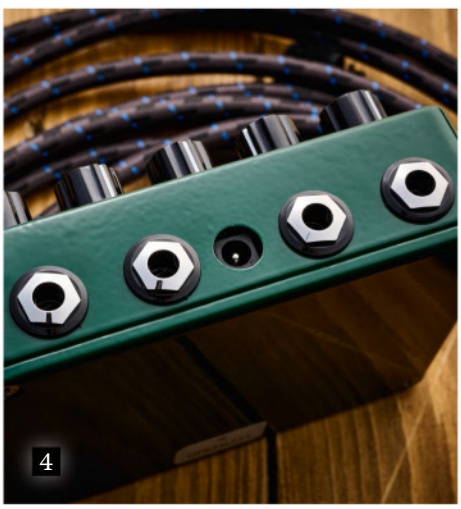
PRICE: £235
ORIGIN: Greece
TYPE: Drive pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Master, Volume, Presence, Bass, Treble, Middle, internal EQ and Volume Boost trimmers, 103/504 switch, B/L/N switch, H Bypass footswitch, Master, Volume, Bass, Treble, Buffer/True switch, PWR/ODR switch, C Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output, standard send, standard return, standard footswitch jack
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 122 (w) x 95 (d) x 53mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.crazytubecircuits.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Two respected vintage sounds in one pedal; effects loop; plenty of tweakability; compact size for a twin-footswitch pedal

CONS The Hiwatt side may need a fair bit of dialling in for optimum use with your own amp



THE RIVALS

If this style of pedal appeals but you're looking for different flavours, Crazy Tube Circuits also bundles Dumble and Klon sounds together in the Unobtanium (£249), while its Crossfire (£189) pairs Fender 'black-panel' sound with Tube Screamer drive. For a Hiwatt-style pedal, check out the Menatone MenaWatt v.III ($209), although you may have to import it from the USA. Macaris does modern recreations of the Colorsound Power Boost (£359) and Overdriver (£329). Also check out the Tru-Fi Colordriver (£199), Electronic Orange Bananaboost (€224) and, if you fancy building one yourself, Aion FX has the Nucleus Vintage Boost printed circuit board ($12.50) but may produce a full kit if enough people are interested.

Crazy Tube Circuits' Unobtanium pedal combines Dumble and Klon-style tones

BEETRONICS ABELHA TROPICAL FUZZ
£299

WHAT IS IT? A fuzzbox from the California pedal maker that channels the spirit of tropicália

Brazilian Buzz

It's designed for Brazilian tropicália music, but this fuzzbox from Beetronics could create a buzz in any musical genre

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The footswitch actually has four operations, each with a different outcome: single tap (bypass), double tap when engaged (mode switching), hold when engaged (momentary mode switching), and hold when disengaged (momentary activation of the effect)

2. This ring of six multicoloured LEDs lights up in four different combinations to let you know when you're in Normal or Tropical mode, both when the effect is on and off

3. The Flavor toggle switch lets you select one of three different sounds, Polen, Nectar or Honey, described respectively in the manual as "sagged low-gain buzz", "round high-gain fuzz" and "sweet high-gain drive"

Beetronics' latest offering is described as a 'Tropical Fuzz', tropical in this instance relating to tropicália – a type of music from Brazil that merges Brazilian and African rhythms with British and American psychedelic rock and pop, and features lots of fuzz guitar. Beetronics says that the Abelha, which incidentally is the Portuguese word for bee, reimagines the classic vibe of the music but infuses it with a forward-thinking twist. A large pedal, it's a proper work of art with an intricately engraved top surface and a large red jewelled bypass LED, as well as a ring of six smaller multicoloured LEDs that light up in different colour combinations to signify various operating states. Let's hope it sounds as good as it looks...

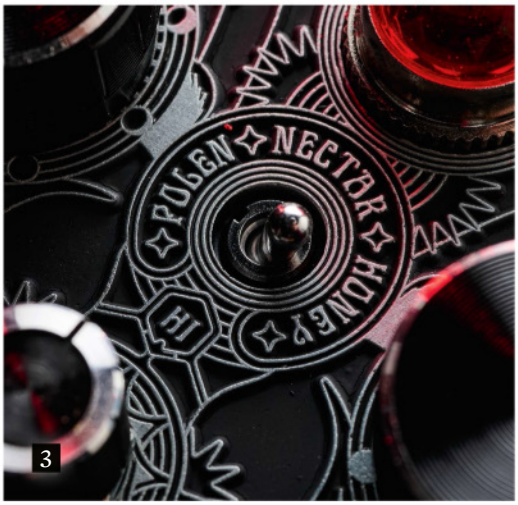
A toggle switch calls up three flavours of fuzz – Polen (Portuguese for pollen), Nectar and Honey – with the sound being dialled in with knobs to turn up the output volume and the fuzz, plus high and low EQ knobs that are very effective in getting the fuzz flavour just right to suit your rig. Polen is gated, sputtery fuzz; quirky but not unplayable. Nectar is classic creamy fuzz with a nice fat midrange, while Honey has a more scooped tonality and top-end clarity. Both could pass for overdrive with the Buzz knob at lower levels, but turned up to the max you get full-on fuzzy goodness that you can roll back with guitar volume.

Further variation is available via Tropical mode, which is a high-pass filter that cuts out a whole load of lower frequencies leaving you with something really quite gnarly. You can keep it as your main fuzz tone if you want buzzy, bright and edgy, but you may just like it dropped in for a passage or a single note. A hold on the footswitch will momentarily switch between the two modes.

The footswitch, in fact, has several actions to facilitate all sorts of operation: a single tap is standard latching bypass, while a double tap selects between Normal and Tropical modes when the effect is engaged. If the effect is disengaged, a hold on the switch will momentarily turn it on, whichever mode it is switched to.

Verdict

We can confirm that the Abhela does indeed sound as good as it looks! Beetronics' new pedal is an excellent fuzz for your 'board with wide-ranging tonal variation and performance tricks that set it apart from the crowd.



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BEETRONICS
ABELHA
TROPICAL FUZZ

PRICE: £299
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Loud, Buzz, Hi, Lo, Flavor toggle (Polen/Nectar/Honey), Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 60 mA
DIMENSIONS: 83 (w) x 180 (d) x 65mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.beetronicsfx.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Looks brilliant; range of fuzz sounds; footswitching options; different vibe from Tropical mode

CONS Expensive and not exactly pedalboard-friendly

THE RIVALS

The Abhela is unique, but here are some other singular takes on fuzz. The Redbeard Effects Hairy Squid (£199) puts three different fuzzes in one pedal, with a toggle switch offering Silicon, LED and Germanium options. The Kernom MOHO (£319), the world's first ever 'augmented' analogue fuzz pedal, has a Mood knob controlling the behaviour of its transistors that is said to allow access to thousands of analogue fuzz pedals in one box. With another distinctive look and varied footswitching modes, the Stone Deaf FX Rise & Shine (£265) puts three effects in one unit – Fuzz, Octave Fuzz and the Octapulse Tremolo Vibrato.

The Hairy Squid from Redbeard Effects puts three fuzz favourites in one pedal

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

PRS 'Dead Spec' Silver Sky £3,495

CONTACT **PRS Europe** WEB **www.prsguitars.com** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

It might have 'broken the internet' on its release late in 2017, but PRS's Silver Sky now seems very much a part of the high-end Stratocaster-inspired market and is now also offered in the more affordable Indonesian-made SE range. It's PRS, so there have been some minor tweaks over the past few years, of course, not least the addition of a maple fretboard option and a couple of satin nitro finishes for this year. But the 'Dead Spec' version, released at the end of 2023, is the biggest change to the 'Sky's blueprint so far.

It takes us back to the 70s, a time when many players would muck up perfectly good guitars with active circuits and brass parts. It's that era that Fender recently revisited with its recreation of Jerry Garcia's modded 'Alligator' Stratocaster – based on an original 50s Stratocaster Jerry was gifted by Graham Nash – a mere snip at £18k. The 'Dead Spec', then, is a "significantly modded" Silver Sky that "pays homage" to that 'Alligator' and is an exact replica of the instrument that John Mayer has been using on his other day job: touring with Dead & Company. Considerably less expensive at just £3.5k, the 'Dead Spec' is a limited run of 1,000 (the earlier Fender was a run of just 100 pieces), but the demand has been huge: trying to get this one required some negotiation!

While that Fender guitar aims to be a facsimile of the 'Alligator', which Jerry started using in the summer of '71, PRS's take is less specific but zones in on its various mods: plenty of brass parts and a basic onboard boost that would become the Alembic Stratoblaster. The 'Dead Spec' also swaps its standard alder body to swamp ash in a very tactile thin satin nitro Moc Sand finish. It uses a PRS Gen III brass vibrato but mounted as a hardtail bridge, a brass nut and Floyd Rose-style string retainer bar, and that Stratoblaster circuit, now called the Blaster, which is still made by Alembic.

There's a lot more to the 'Dead Spec' than simply copping Jerry Garcia's short-lived Alligator tone (he retired the guitar on 1 August 1973, his 31st birthday). We'd wager there's a firmer, almost more fundamental tone here that certainly doesn't lack sustain or indeed very clear note separation; it requires an accurate touch. Adding in the Blaster, pre-set by PRS, there's a small level boost that noticeably enhances the clarity and we'd say very slightly thickens the voice. But that's only one way to use it: pull back the tone controls, for example, and engage the boost to produce a more humbucking-like thickness, plus you can experiment with the exact amount of boost that's right for you. Loon pants and beads are optional.

1. As far as we're aware, this is the first time a PRS production guitar has featured a brass nut. The string retainer bar emulates the one used on the low four strings of the Alligator, subtly increasing the back angle behind the nut

2. The guitar comes in a hard case and includes a surface-mounted vibrato, which has no springs and doesn't move. There's also an easy access compartment for the battery necessary to power the preamp

3. Alembic's Stratoblaster was used by many back in the day, from Adrian Belew to James Honeyman-Scott. It's a pretty simple circuit with a 3dB to 14dB gain boost, adjustable via a trim pot accessed through that small hole on the brass plate

4. One fundamental change to the 'Dead Spec' is the body wood: here it's swamp ash, not alder, which contributes to an overall weight of 3.46kg (7.61lb). Aside from the other mods, the 'Dead Spec' has the same 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius with small width but high fretwire and, of course, the same 635 JM single coil pickups of the standard Silver Sky

5. "We made this non-tremolo guitar with a lot of brass, which gave the guitar a beautiful warm midrange," says Paul Reed Smith, "and the Alembic Blaster switch, which cleared everything up and gave the guitar some courage. The other thing I love is that the finish sinks into the wood. It's part of the guitar, so the guitar feels alive in your hands. That's really cool. The original guitar was made in a few days to make sure John was getting the sounds he wanted on that tour. Then he said he wanted to release it, we were like, 'What?' But I got my hands on one the other day. I wanted to own it, I really like it"

Guitarist would like to thank Wildwire Guitars for the loan of the featured guitar https://wildwireguitars.com

THE LINEUP

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

Mesa/Boogie Mark VII £3,849 to £4,199

CONTACT **Gibson** PHONE **00800-44427661** WEB **www.mesaboogie.com**

LOOKING BACK

Where's Boogie Been?

We asked Gibson about Mesa/Boogie's absence, and the answer is more straightforward than you might think: one of Mesa/Boogie's parts suppliers closed its doors and approval in the European market is strict. So, with "supply chain issues and due diligence with a new supplier" now complete, we're now once again free to get our Boogie on.

Mesa/Boogie! Haven't seen one of them in a guitar shop for a while.

Nope. In fact, a lot has changed since 2021 when the company was acquired by Gibson. Following some supply chain issues (see 'Looking Back' box, left), Boogie is now well and truly back, and it's brought a brand-new amp design with it: the Mark VII.

Brand-new? Or just new to the UK?

Okay, so out of sight may not always mean out of mind, and if you've been paying attention then you might have seen the launch of the Mesa/Boogie Mark VII last summer, when it was rolled out in territories excluding Europe. But it's new to us and will be available in the UK for the first time by the time you read this.

Enough backstory, tell us about the amp!

The Mark VII (the folk at Boogie decided to miss the VI, which remains in unreleased prototype form for now) is described by Boogie as Randall Smith's "Magnum Opus" of tone. That's because it crams a massive nine preamp modes into one 90-watt amp, shared between three channels. Each of those three channels is stocked with a three-band EQ (plus presence), as well as gain and channel volume controls, and each channel can also be selected to run at individually assignable output powers. More on that in a moment.

What circuits are they?

You have three channels: Channel 1 has preamp options for Clean, Fat and Crunch; Channel 2 offers Fat, Crunch

FORMATS
The Mark VII is available in head, rackmount head and 1x12 combo formats. The latter comes loaded with a Celestion Custom 90

CHANNELS
Three channels, each with three preamp designs and three individually assignable output power ratings, mean the MKVII is packing a huge amount of tonal options

GRAPHIC EQ
It wouldn't be a Mark without the five-band graphic EQ, would it? Here, it can be assigned to a footswitch, along with the onboard valve-driven spring reverb

FEATURES
As well as Boogie's Multi-Watt and Simul-Class output features, there's a CabClone around the back, complete with headphones, direct outputs and a USB interface

and the new MKVII high-gain voice; and Channel 3 delivers a bit of Mesa/Boogie nostalgia courtesy of the MKIIB, MKIIC+ and MKIV preamps.

That's a lot of toggles to press – and that's not even all of them?

There are plenty of options, for sure. But the other mini-toggles on each channel take care of the distinctive (and footswitch assignable) five-band graphic EQ, and the power switching we mentioned earlier. Over in the master section, there are further mini-toggles for switching-in/out the reverb for each channel, and as with the EQ, these can be assigned to a footswitch, too.

What's this power thing about, then?

As with previous Mark series amps, Mesa/Boogie has included the ability to drop each channel's output from the full 90 watts down to 45 watts or 25 watts. Boogie calls the power amp tech Simul-Class because, as well as a change in power, it also changes the class operation of the channel. With the switch in the 25-watt position, the output is running two output valves (6L6 or EL34) in Class A Triode. In 45-watt mode, it still only uses two of the output valves but this time in Class A Pentode, and with the 90-watt position selected we get the full output, which Mesa/Boogie says blends the best of Class A and Class A/B to create "pure tonal magic".

The Mesa/Boogie Mark VII crams a massive nine preamp modes into one 90-watt amp

They've packed a lot in!

Yes, but we're not done yet! On the other side of the amp, there's a CabClone IR DI module, offering eight cabinet options per channel, dry line out, headphone socket and XLR output, as well as a USB interface and MIDI in/out/thru for comprehensive control.

So, what are the model options in the range?

There's the Mark VII Head, Mark VII Rackmount Head (both £3,849) and Mark VII 1x12 Combo (£4,199); all are shipping now. If you want to check them out, head to your nearest dealer or take a trip to the newly opened Gibson Garage London to give them a go, along with the entire Mesa/Boogie range. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

SHEERAN BY LOWDEN STADIUM EDITION & SHEERAN LOOPERS FROM £299

Suffolk's biggest pop export has launched not one but two signature products. First up is the first ever handmade Sheeran By Lowden model, making it (for all intents and purposes) a full-blown Lowden. The Stadium Edition (£4,500) is limited to 150 pieces and is designed to be an exact replica of Ed's stage guitar, featuring a WL (Wee Lowden) body made of solid rosewood back and sides with a spruce top, including Lowden's Stadium Voicing to maximise clarity and resonance, while also fighting feedback.

Meanwhile, Sheeran has also launched a pair of signature looper pedals. Designed by the guitarist and his production team, the Sheeran Looper + (£299) and the larger Sheeran Looper X (£1,199) put Sheeran's looping capabilities at your feet, with multi-track looping (two on the + model, four on the X), multiple looping modes and effects all built in.

www.sheeranguitars.com

VINTAGE REVO SERIES FROM £449

We love vintage gear – and we love affordable gear just as much. Sadly, the two are often mutually exclusive. But now Vintage (the brand) has teamed up with Alan Entwistle to ensure our retro cup runneth over with its new REVO series. The REVO (Retro Vintage Originals) line comprises a staggering number of guitars split into nine ranges: Deluxe, Vision, Trio, Midline, Surfmaster, Integra, Colt, Supreme and Superthin. The entire line-up spans semi-acoustics, offsets, double-cuts and more, plus there are 12-string and baritone models. Each one features Wilkinson hardware, Graph Tech nuts and Entwistle pickups. Prices start at £449.

www.vintageguitarsrus.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: James Frankland

Album: Fate's Right Hand (self-released)

Fate's Right Hand comprises 12 tracks of instrumental guitar **jamesfrankland.bandcamp.com**

James Frankland has made a name for himself as an instrumental guitar player who's able to bring intricate layers into his music, as we see on his latest release, *Fate's Right Hand*. However, he didn't find an immediate connection to music. "I first started playing when I was seven, but I didn't like it for about six years," he says. "Then when I was about 13 there were YouTube and Ultimate Guitar tabs, so I could access Joe Satriani and Guns N' Roses lessons. It was a good time for learning."

Challenging Players

James explores a range of moods across *Fate's Right Hand*, from the aggressively charged *Stalemate* to piano-accompanied slowy *In The Depths*. It displays an ability that has been honed through much listening and playing. "Guns N' Roses was definitely the one that got me into guitar," he says. "After that probably Alter Bridge, but more Myles Kennedy's playing, rather than Mark Tremonti. Myles goes for the gross notes; he'll hammer in the ♭5 and he gets away with some nasty notes, which I really like. Another one is Jeff Beck – it's an acquired taste, but once I got my head around it I thought he was untouchable. I managed to see him before he passed away. That was a cool concert."

PHOTO BY: JARED STUBBINGS / ARTISAN IMAGING

A melting pot of influences inform James's approach to instrumental guitar, from Guns N' Roses to Rachmaninoff

When Classical Meets Rock

Like many instrumental guitarists before him, James found classical music entering the mix. "I wanted to push the piano and guitar accompaniment on this one," he explains. "When I was writing I was listening to a lot of music, but a big one was Rachmaninoff and his classical piano stuff because he has some really moody chord progressions. It made it quite a challenge – the sound takes up a big frequency spectrum. There's super low and high there, but all of the ideas began on the electric guitar. There are so many instrumental rock albums, I really wanted to find something that hadn't been done so much, like the piano accompaniments."

Audience Participation

When it comes to performing live, James likes the idea of a more interactive show, where the audience can engage with the artist. "I'd like to do some clinic dates," he says. "I've always liked those and it's partly what drew me to the instrumental side of music and gear demos. The clinic shows give the audience the opportunity to get to know the performers a bit more; they get to learn why they write the way they do and use the gear they use.

"It's a bit like a guitar shop tour," he continues. "There's a much smaller audience and you might be on for an hour and a half, but you'll only play four or five songs in that time and the rest is spent answering questions. I've always been into that kind of performance. It's also a bit less daunting!"

Deep Listening

James is a meticulous audiophile, with his preparation for a new album coming down to the finest detail. Much of this prep comes from further listening. "I'm interested in a lot of aspects of [creating music]," he tells us, "so when it comes to composition, a lot of it comes from listening to other artists for specific areas. It comes down to what flavours I want to absorb. When we play we think we know what should come next, but that changes with listening tastes. I've been trying to train my ear towards a new set of intervals or chords. For this one, as well as classical music for augmented chords, I was listening to Muse a bit for harmonies, too. It's hard when doing instrumental music to keep it evolving and not just do the same thing again." **[GK]**

Standout track: *Zenith*
For fans of: Guns N' Roses, Myles Kennedy, Steve Vai

"I wanted to push the piano and guitar accompaniment on this one, so I was listening to a lot of Rachmaninoff – he has some really moody chord progressions"

ANGRY GUITARS

For the lead parts on *Fate's Right Hand*, James chose guitars with a particular personality

"The main rule was single-coil guitars for lead parts," he says. "I really like vintage Japanese Fenders. A lot of this one was done on a 1989 Japanese Esquire: just one pickup, super round fretboard and tiny frets. I liked it because you have to hang on – it's the angriest guitar I've played! I also used a Chapman ML3 Standard; like the Esquire, it's not an expensive guitar, but it felt right and that's the important thing."

Elsewhere in James's rig is a special collaboration with Ambler Custom Guitars that resulted in the dual Seymour Duncan 'Phat Cat' P-90-loaded Capulet model, which has a master-grade 5A quilted maple top, swamp ash body and quarter-sawn roasted maple neck. A Victory V40 The Duchess and Orange OR15 make up his backline.

PHOTO BY SARAH FRANKLAND

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

PHOTO BY MURDO MACLEOD

Knopfler's flair for storytelling runs deep in his 10th studio album

Mark Knopfler

One Deep River

British Grove/EMI (available 12 April)

9/10

A storied masterpiece from the sultan of song

There are very few guitarists whose style manages to win a place in the 'instantly recognisable' club, but Mark Knopfler is certainly a fully paid-up member of that particular elite. That unmistakable semi-clean Strat sound – plus, of course, the occasional Les Paul, Telecaster and sundry Stratalike six-string exotica – permeated every release by that fabulous beast that was Dire Straits. But when that enterprise took its final curtain call in 1995, Knopfler engaged upon a solo career that has seen him release no fewer than nine albums to date. *One Deep River* is the tenth, the title song of which is a personal paean to the Tyne that flows through his beloved Newcastle.

Produced by Knopfler and long-time collaborator Guy Fletcher and recorded at MK's state-of-the-art Grove Studios, *One Deep River* features 12 songs in its single CD release format, expanded to the tune of four or five bonus tracks depending on which deluxe package you choose. Always the master storyteller, lyrically the songs cover everything from early days trying to make it in the music business to a daring railroad robbery in the old Wild West on *Tunnel 13*. Aside from the signature Strat tones, there's sensitive acoustic playing on tracks such as *Sweeter Than The Rain*. But as is the case with every master craftsperson, it's the songs themselves that bask in the spotlight, the guitars playing only what's necessary and nothing more. As such, the album is a masterclass in the art of subtlety and restraint that will sit happily alongside Knopfler's finest work. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Black Tie Jobs*
For fans of: Dire Straits, JJ Cale, John Hiatt

Martin Simpson

Skydancers

Topic Records (available 12 April)

10/10

Moving, perfectly performed feast of folk guitar delivers sorrow and joy

Any new Martin Simpson album is a treat for folk-guitar fans, but with *Skydancers*, he may just have delivered his magnum opus. Comprising two discs, one of studio recordings, the other of some superbly recorded live performances, all of life is here – from nature in conflict with man in the title track to ale-house rakes who've lost it all to drink and hedonism in *Flash Company*, the sorrow and fleeting joys of the world are etched in the listener's imagination with masterly skill. In so doing, Simpson draws upon a deep well of extraordinary folk songs from both Britain and America as well as his own compositions. So it's testament to his artistry that everything coheres gracefully and movingly here – and we don't think we've ever heard him play so well as on some of the live tracks, notably *Leaves Of Life*. As you'd expect, his Muiderman and Taran acoustic guitars sound stunning throughout – a record for both heart and head, *Skydancers* is one of those albums that's just good for the soul. **[JD]**

Standout track: *Leaves Of Life*
For fans of: John Renbourn, Kelly Joe Phelps

Eric Bibb

Live at The Scala Theatre Stockholm

Stony Plain Records (available 5 April)

9/10

Velvet-voiced bluesman creates atmospheric live album

"The *Live At The Scala* concert was, without a doubt, the most ambitious gig and recording project of my career..." says Eric Bibb of his brand-new live album. Ambitious it certainly is, too. Perhaps known more for playing solo, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, this album sees the bluesman with a full band and a string section adding a brilliant extra dimension to songs old and new. Eric tells us that the mission here was to deliver a live album that offered songs that had not been visited on live outings before, plus a few fan favourites, and it succeeds on every level. The band proves to be a perfect foil for the pristine guitar work, with soulful ballads such as *Along The Way* and *Rosewood* being particularly effective in this context. Simply fabulous. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Along The Way*
For fans of: Keb' Mo', Taj Mahal

Sophie Lloyd proves her credentials on star-studded debut album

Sophie Lloyd
Imposter Syndrome
Autumn Records (available now)

8/10

UK shred-rocker delivers powerful debut

Sophie Lloyd has been a social media whirlwind, drumming up lots of views on YouTube and other outlets. An ex-BIMM student, she's grabbed the guitar world's attention and has now released her debut album. Enhanced with various guests including Matt Heafy (Trivium) and Nathan James (Inglorious), her classic rock and metal roots shine throughout, be it with palm-muted powerchords or slippery legato leads. The title track begins with clean ambient guitar before thick distorted chords take over, and with Lzzy Hales on vocals, it's a big-sounding song with one of Lloyd's more chilled solos. The drop D fuelled *Let It Hurt* features Chris Robertson for a husky American-styled rocker, big on production and sonic punch. For a more modern shred presentation, *Fall Of Man* with Matt Heafy is worth a listen, not least for the tapping legato intro and later solos. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Let It Hurt*
For fans of: Halestorm, Alter Bridge

Troy Redfern
Invocation
RED7 Records (available 17 May)

9/10

One-man blues-rock army ignites the airwaves

Troy Redfern sure knows how to wield a slide! With a new batch of 11 stomping songs, his playing and vocal delivery here are sure to grab attention with well-crafted compositions and arrangements. Opener, *The Strange*, is a pounding, low C throb rocker with huge chorus vocals and a cracking slide solo, and low C tuning occurs again on *Van Helsing* with clipped Clash-esque chords and propulsive chorus guitars and rhythm section. *Getaway* has a Rolling Stones meets Mötley Crüe vibe with slinky guitar action and raucous vocals, while *The Calling* nods towards The Cult, with great anthemic guitar work and dynamic shifts. The swampy stomp of *The Fever* is a particular standout, with a span that nods back to ZZ Top and forwards to modern rock production intensity. And if you hanker for further rock pulverising, *Voodoo Priestess* is outstanding: grungy guitars, screaming slide work and exclamatory vocals will shudder your speakers for sure. **[JS]**

Standout track: *The Fever*
For fans of: When Rivers Meet, JD Simo

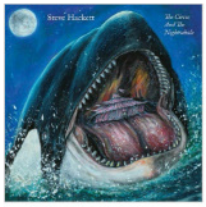
THE LINEUP

Tones Behind The Tracks

Steve Hackett dishes out a rich helping of prog on *The Circus And The Nightwhale*. We look behind the scenes with the ringmaster himself...

Artist: Steve Hackett

Album: The Circus And The Nightwhale (InsideOut Music)



Essentially a concept album, *The Circus And The Nightwhale* details the varying fortunes of a character called Travla

Steve Hackett has been enjoying phenomenal success worldwide with his Genesis Revisited project, but live shows are always peppered with material from a solo repertoire that extends back into the 1970s. Recent years have seen his albums gain traction in the charts with his signature melodic guitar tone always to the forefront. As he's continually searching for new themes to explore, the latest album is largely semi-autobiographical, featuring the life and times of a fictional character called Travla. Heavy riffs and lavish orchestrations are the order of the day hereabouts, and we couldn't resist the opportunity to find out more about the album's origins...

Your albums have always had quite a strong narrative to them, but this one in particular, to the extent that you have described it as semi-autobiographical. Could you explain a little bit about the story behind *The Circus And The Nightwhale*?

"Well, my wife, Jo [Lehmann], had the idea for the title. We had been kicking around the idea of something that was semi-autobiographical so I could draw on the experience of what it was like to be born in 1950, in London, as in *People Of The Smoke*, the opening track – 'the smoke' being a nickname for London. Like so many of the things that I work on with her, it took a little bit of time for the penny to drop. She was the one who said to me that people like a story. I resisted that for a while, I thought, 'Oh, concept albums...' they were something always heavily criticised by critics at one time. It became very passé. But then it became acceptable again and we've done various things that are stories within themselves, like *Under A Mediterranean Sky* [2021], my instrumental album, describing different countries around the Mediterranean."

How did you begin to shape the story?

"Jo suggested Travla as a third person so that we could take it into realms that were perhaps more Pinocchio-esque, or more Homeric, perhaps. The hero's quest approach. That's how we work together, things are born out of conversations and then Roger King [keyboards, programming and arrangements], who puts all this stuff together, makes our dreams a reality. I play guitar, I sing, I try to get involved in the close detail as much as possible. We do computer sketches, then we get humans to play it – that's how it seems to work. It's always been a mystery to me how anything gets finished at all with the amount of time we spend on the road doing shows. We even recorded some stuff at soundchecks because we were challenged for time, so some of this album is recorded live in halls that we were doing concerts in."

What form did the main recording sessions take for this album?

"I found a unique way of working where I think you get a lot out of yourself and other people if you're working in so-called 'downtime', where you're not really expecting anything. So anything you get from a situation like that is a plus. It was recorded in maybe four or five different batches at home, in this very room, co-ordinating everything and playing guitar here. But

The sessions for the new album include recordings from soundchecks while Steve's band was on tour

PHOTO BY DANIEL KNIGHTON/GETTY IMAGES

"Concept albums were heavily criticised... but then became acceptable again. We've done various things that are stories within themselves"

PHOTO BY TINA KORHONEN

I don't think it's harmed it at all, you know? Having to wing it seems to have helped it. I wanted things to be pretty brief, as it's very easy to overstay your welcome with any one particular idea, it seems to me."

One of the acknowledged millstones of a concept album is that there's the expectation that it has to be performed in its complete form – something you will have experienced before in Genesis with *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*. Are you going to get a chance to perform this album as a whole?

"That's a huge challenge. I hadn't expected that it was going to be so well received. One of the videos has gone viral – the one for *People Of The Smoke* – and I'm at this point where I've only got a certain amount of time on my hands. I'd like to do the whole thing, but at the moment I'm supposed to be celebrating *Foxtrot* in America, *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* over here – not in its entirety. It's a real conundrum.

"I would like to think that although it works as a cohesive whole, it should be possible to do some things from it. If I was watching The Beatles and they suddenly went into *Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite!*, I'd be on my feet. Things should be able to work in total, and they should be able to work separately. I've headed towards doing Genesis albums in total; the two that I've really gone for have been *Foxtrot* and *Selling England By The Pound* from '72 and '73. That was when John Lennon said he thought that Genesis were true sons of The Beatles, so as far as I'm concerned that's the golden era of Genesis to celebrate."

Steve's albums have always featured his classical guitar playing, his main instrument being a 50-year-old Yairi

"It's always been a mystery how anything gets finished with the amount of time we spend on the road... We even recorded some stuff at soundchecks"

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE/FUTURE PUBLISHING

How much of your own story is wrapped up in the album's storyline – or are you going to let people draw their own conclusions?

"I have to be a little bit careful because I don't want to point fingers at people and blame them for my extremely screwed-up state of mind at various points. There was an aspect of claustrophobia that invaded my time with Genesis, and I had to work outside the band. I think if you're feeling creative and you've got that album or that book or that film inside you, you don't want to let it fester. You've got to get it out there. Genesis was becoming a little bit too much of a closed shop and it was affecting my ability to sleep. I agonised over leaving the band for a good two years and then I thought, 'No, I've got to make a leap of faith at this point in time.' And there's no doubt that I made the right decision. If you look at it purely in financial terms, you would have said, 'Yeah, but you could afford Buckingham Palace by now if you'd stayed with the band.' But on the other hand, music is its own currency. It's what nourishes you, if you need to do it."

Let's talk a little bit more about the recording process. Obviously, you've experienced being in a band, recording together in the studio, but these days it's far more common to have contributions made remotely, thanks to the internet. Do you have a preference?

"There's no doubt about the camaraderie of a band when everyone is swinging together and there's virtual telepathy going on. Those moments are irreplaceable and I had that with Genesis; there were certain moments where the music was literally writing itself. That also happened with my own first touring band. When we were making *Spectral Mornings*, we were partying into the night and there was an album at the end of it! Everyone was getting a chance to express themselves and play and sing wonderfully.

"So I've seen it from both sides. But I also love the modern way of working where you do some kind of demo, some kind of computer sketch, and then you send it off to someone, and you're not poring over their shoulder, they've got time to absorb it, figure that they can do this and that and nobody has to hear all their bum notes. I just get the finished product from them."

Were the guitars on the album primarily your Fernandez and Goldtop Les Paul?

"They're both in evidence on the album and they produce different sounds. You sacrifice a certain amount of tone control with the Fernandes Sustainer pickup aspect, but it gives you something else – those screaming kettle police car noises and sustain to die for, with no tyranny of volume, because it's the guitar itself that's feeding back. So once you're managing to isolate the notes you can get something absolutely spectacular from it. Then on *Wherever You Are*, the penultimate track, I was using one of Brian May's guitars that he invented, a Red Special. It was overdriven, but I was using the neck pickup out of phase with the other two, providing this kind of upper harmonic honky quality that you'd normally get from cocked wah."

PHOTO BY DAVE SIMPSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Steve performing live at Auckland Town Hall, New Zealand in 2022 with his favoured Fernandez Sustainer guitar

There's some classical guitar on the album, too. What type of nylon-string do you use?

"When we were working on *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* in 1974 I bought a Yairi; it was the loudest guitar in the shop and I could just about afford it. I've kept this guitar now for 50 years and I just had the action lowered on it recently, which improved its playability. I use light gauge strings on it – D'Addario Pro-Arté – which probably squeak the least of all the ones I've worked with over the years."

"There was an aspect of claustrophobia that invaded my time with Genesis, and I had to work outside the band. [I had to] make a leap of faith"

Did you use amps or modellers for the album?

"For this I went straight in. No amps were harmed, they're all virtual models. I don't think it's obvious that I work like that. Live, I use Engl amps and my overdrive is Sansamp. Just for practice, I've started using two of those in series; whether that will work live, I don't know. I'm after boosting a little bit more all the time. Then there's a volume pedal, Whammy pedal... I've got a little Peavey practice amp that I use at home and I sometimes record with that. But it's not the size of the amp, it's what you're doing with it." **[DM]**

The Circus And The Nightwhale by Steve Hackett is available now via InsideOut Music

www.hackettsongs.com

NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

He Ain't Neck Heavy...

Neville Marten wonders why some manufacturers, who otherwise do sophisticated, musically wonderful things, sometimes fall at the final fence

They say that with 12-string guitars you spend half the time tuning and the other half playing out of tune. They should have added, "and lifting the neck up because it's dropped due to the weight of 12 cast metal tuners!"

As someone who's ironed his own clothes since he was about 12, I can't count the times I've cursed the iron's creator: "Did the idiot that designed this ever actually try it?" The cables always foul up, and the one I currently use has a space where you're supposed to coil the cord, but the space isn't big enough unless you spend five minutes meticulously wrapping it, and there's no clip to stop the thing simply unravelling.

"The headstock on my new 12-string has dived towards the floor. Could it be that the headstock is carrying an extra half pound of metal?"

And driving. My old gig travelling companion Rog used to say, "The trouble with 'smart' motorways is, they're only as smart as the people who design 'em!" One time, we were gigging in England's North West, and Rog was driving. It was a Friday, I think, and traffic was heavy. A sign over the motorway suddenly read, 'Long Delays Ahead'. I said to Rog, "So how long is long?" 20 minutes we could live with, but if it's an hour we're stymied. I found the local Highways Agency number and actually got through. I said to the guy: "Why don't you say how long the delay is, then we can decide whether or not to find another route? You think that by writing 'Long Delays' you've done your job, but that doesn't help drivers at all." He hummed and hawed, but, no kidding, a little further along the overhead sign was reading, "70 Minutes Delay." I'd like to think it was my doing. Needless to say, we exited the motorway as soon as we could.

This general beef with everything arose because I have tried a few 12-string acoustics recently, and looked at lots more online. So can the manufacturers tell me why, when adding a third as much again onto the headstock's length to accommodate six extra tuners, do they almost invariably fit a dozen heavy cast metal machineheads? Especially when they don't use these on the six-string version?

"Oh look, the headstock on my new 12-string has dived towards the floor. Could it be that the headstock is carrying an extra half pound of metal?" Yes, perhaps that's it! A few, like the American-built Guild 512, have 12 open Waverly-style tuners, and open six-a-sides are readily available. So, surely it's not beyond the wit and buying power of other big acoustic companies to address the issue? True, some like Takamine often fit lighter plastic buttons, which certainly helps, but Schaller and Grover-type tuners – which have kept guitarists in tune for decades – both supply lighter wooden or plastic buttons, so why aren't they more commonly employed?

Slot Machines

Vintage 12-string Martins used the slotted headstock design. It removed wood to save weight, plus they fitted side-mounted classical style six-on-a-strip tuners. Today, it's 12 heavy Schallers on a solid headstock! It looks so inelegant, too. Taylor, who usually gets everything so right, does the same. Old Gibsons had six-on-a-plate Klusons, now it's 12 cast Grovers.

Now, I admit I haven't played every single one of these actual guitars, but years of playing and reviewing experience tell me that most of them will neck-dive when played on a strap. Many makers now fit a button on the underside of the heel, which pulls the neck up more than if it were screwed to the heel tip, but my own six-string Taylor also neck dives so I'm replacing the metal Grover buttons with lighter ebony ones.

Perhaps we should go back to how the live acoustic guitarists used to work. And that was to attach the end of the strap to the headstock, usually by a bootlace type affair that slipped under the strings behind the nut; new straps even came with the lace. It looks so cool that way, too – think of Elvis, Johnny Cash or Joan Baez. Who agrees? I'm going to try it. See you next time. G

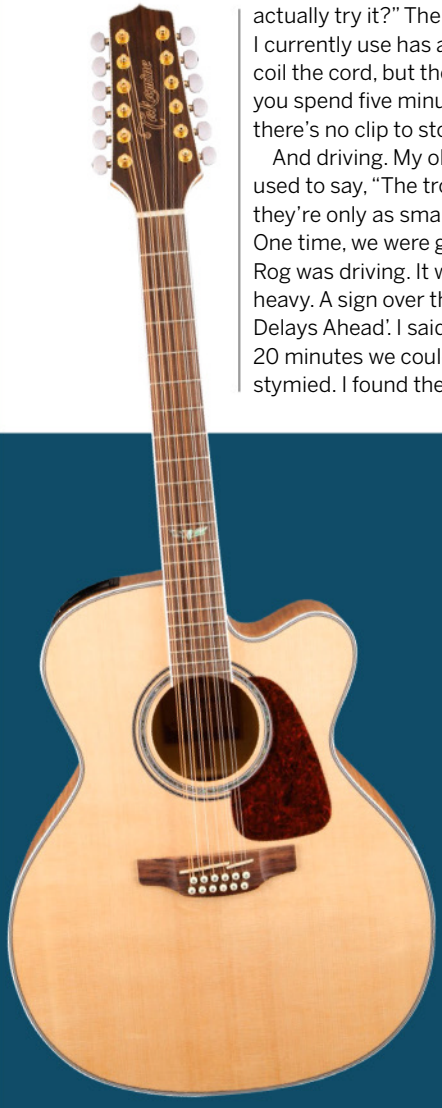


PHOTO: WWW.BAX-SHOP.CO.UK

GAS OF THE MONTH
Daily Dozen

What? Takamine GJ72CE-12NAT
Where seen? www.bax-shop.co.uk
Price? £569

Despite Takamine's bonkers naming scheme, this company does know how to make great stage acoustics. This jumbo 12 is a case in point. With a cutaway laminated maple body and solid spruce top, and 20-fret bound rosewood fingerboard with dragonfly 12th-fret inlay, it's a fine-looking beast. Pickup-wise, it boasts Takamine's simple but excellent TK-40D preamp with volume, three-band EQ, notch filter, mid contour, and tuner with LED display. Oh, and its 12 cast tuners at least have lighter plastic buttons!

Taking Shape

Alex Bishop attempts to charm some timber into shape with little more than heat, water and perseverance

I've mentioned before what a privilege it is to work with some of the rarest and most beautiful woods on the planet. Like many acoustic guitar makers, it fills me with gratitude to be able to set my hands working upon the smooth honey-coloured grain of cherry wood, or scrape ribbons of fine gossamer from the surface of a Macassar ebony guitar back.

As woodworkers, we can quickly intuit the useful properties of different woods as we work them with hand tools. Rosewood is dense and oily (great for hard-wearing fingerboards and bridges) whereas Spanish cedar is feather-light but stiff (ideal for well-balanced necks). But we get even more intimate feedback from timber when we try to bend it into shape.

As anyone who has built their first guitar by hand will attest, feelings of wood appreciation can easily dissolve into palpable fear when faced with the prospect of coaxing an expensive tonewood into the guitar mould. There is significant jeopardy involved, given the possibility of wood splitting or even cracking under the pressure to conform to the undulating curves of a guitar.

There are many factors at play, but the thickness of the wood is a key starting point to problem-free side bending. Too thick and the workpiece will stubbornly resist bending at all, but too thin and the resulting instrument will end up too delicate for practical use. A prescribed thickness would be helpful, but then all types of wood respond differently to bending and optimise within a range of thicknesses. Ebony, for example, has a remarkable memory and will spring back much more than something like walnut, which will follow your direction all too readily, like an overenthusiastic dog chasing an imaginary stick.

A controlled source of heat and moisture is critical, too: I use a bending iron designed for this very purpose. It is a column of metal with a cross-section resembling an aeroplane wing, with a thermostatically controlled heating element inside. It gets easily hot enough to fry an egg on top, so a generous spritz of water is required to not only help avoid charring the wood but also to percolate through the wood fibres in the form of steam. This allows the fibres to stretch and twist according to the way the guitar side is pressed and pulled against the curve of the iron. The resulting shape must follow the outline of my template perfectly to avoid unnecessary stress in the joins to the front and back. Once cooled, the guitar sides must relax into the desired shape, dropping perfectly into the mould without putting up a fight – or, at least, that's the theory.

> "Feelings of wood appreciation can dissolve into palpable fear when faced with the prospect of coaxing an expensive tonewood into the mould"

Stop & Smell The Rosewood

Bending the sides in this way highlights another other aspect of the timber: the aroma. Visitors will invariably comment on the (normally) favourable smell of my workshop if I have spent the morning bending wood in this way. Steaming rosewood, for example, gives rise to the sweet floral fragrance that provides us with its name. Yellow cedar produces a delicious aroma that reminds me of my grandma's apple crumble. Not all tonewoods, however, are a treat for the nostrils – steamed bubinga is not unlike the odour of a forgotten pet hamster's cage.

As the wood is pulled and stretched, a guitar outline begins to emerge. It might be missing some crucial parts, but I feel a satisfaction in seeing the project quite literally taking shape. My hand runs across the sides to check for flaws and inconsistencies and I realise that the direct physical contact between my hands and the timber is, to me, a vital part of building musical instruments. As a species, we grasped wood in our hands before we even descended to walk on the ground. We made offerings of wood to the fire as the first communities began to emerge. We made music even as we learned to speak. Given the burdensome trappings of life in the modern age, I'm pleased that guitar making – in its own way – maintains that connection to my primal roots.

Problem-free bending depends on many factors, including the thickness of the wood and keeping the source of heat and moisture under control

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

It's A Wrap

After his year-long project comes to a close, **Jamie Dickson** shares the tone lessons – and more – from completing his first acoustic album

Regular readers may recall that around March of last year I began recording an album of acoustic fingerstyle pieces inspired by John Renbourn, John Martyn and 70s folk guitar at large. Chris Turpin, of the acclaimed roots-rock band Ida Mae, agreed to produce the record and, working around his busy touring schedule, we completed the sessions throughout the course of a year.

Thanks to his excellent contacts, plus a few old friends of mine, we were able to get some amazing musicians onto the record, including bassist Nick Pini (Laura Marling, Tom Jones), vocalist Bethia Beadman (Courtney Love/ eponymous solo work), fiddle player Aaron Catlow (Sheelanagig/Kit Hawes) and Stephanie Jean Ward, Chris's musical partner in crime in Ida Mae, on flute and piano.

"Accept that you are a real artist, as entitled as any other to make a record, who has a clear vision of what they want to achieve"

From all these wonderful ingredients a finished album emerged that added just a touch of Glastonbury mysticism to its British folk influences and, happily, I can place hand on heart and say I'm very proud of it. And so, in this final report about the recording process, I'd like to pass on a few lessons I learned along the way, for whatever they may be worth. I hope they may be of some use to you if you should decide to make a record, too.

Though the bulk of the album was recorded with a Martin Custom 000-14, this extraordinary Musser dreadnought brought the final track of the album to life with its endlessly sustaining, piano-like voice

1. You Don't Have To Do Everything

The first big lesson was the value of working with a professional producer in a well-equipped studio. I'm not going to knock the home recording approach; it works really well for a lot of people. But I felt I was able to do so much more than I could have imagined by working under Chris's guidance in his studio. He has years of experience making records, great ears and carefully chosen vintage studio gear. Also, his skills in managing the engineering side of the recording process allowed me to focus solely on playing as well as I could and making good creative choices.

For example, Chris put up a variety of vintage and modern mics at first to see which would best capture the sound we were after. In the end, a high-end Neumann U 47 clone called a FLEA47 did most of the heavy lifting. But Chris's knowledge and well-equipped studio gave me great options to choose from before we settled on a preferred approach. No, a producer's time doesn't come for free – but find the right one and it will help your album flourish and grow well beyond what you first imagined it could be.

2. Work With The Best Musicians

I recommend moving heaven and earth to get top-notch musicians to play on your record. Ask around for who's considered seriously good in your area and pay what they're worth to have them do a session. Even musicians in fairly high-profile acts are sometimes happy to do a session on the side for fair pay, especially if they like the vibe of your project. Their input will really raise the overall quality of your record, and if they're really good they may suggest doing things with the arrangement you hadn't even thought of but that fit perfectly.

3. Embrace The Unexpected

I went into the studio expecting to use my Martin 000-14 for everything, as I was so familiar with it and very happy with how it sounded. Yet by the end of the process, the album also featured a Beard Deco Phonic with birch back and sides, a National Resonator, a 1957 Martin 0-18, plus a beautiful hand-built acoustic by Don Musser kindly loaned by Vintage 'n' Rare Guitars in Bath. While I did, in fact, use my 000-14 for the bulk of the album's songs, which were mostly in DADGAD, I didn't really want to mess with it too much by retuning it to standard and back again when necessary. Producer Chris had wisely brought out a few of his own guitars and that's how I got to try the Deco Phonic and decide it sounded perfect for all the standard stuff. The National, meanwhile, added a kind of clanky charisma to one track, while the vintage 0-18 brought a kind of woody midrange twang that helped another track stand out.

Trying a few different things usually yields a bit of welcome light and shade and, in so doing, you might just be surprised how a guitar you never used before becomes central to a whole recording.

Jamie and his producer, Chris Turpin of Ida Mae, toast the completion of their studio adventures with some Czech wine bought, appropriately, on a visit to the Furch acoustic factory last year

4. Coated Strings Are Your Friend

Mainly one for the acoustic guitarists, this, but if you want your recording to be free of those intrusive squeaks and squoinks that sound like sneakers on a basketball court, I seriously recommend using coated strings. My album was recorded with an Elixir Nanoweb 12 to 53 gauge set on the Martin and (I think) on the Beard Deco Phonic as well. To my ears, these smooth off some of the sharpest treble frequencies and also help your fingers glide over the strings. Not all coated strings are the same – some coat only the wrap wire not the core, while others sheath the whole string – but whatever the pros and cons, there's a very strong case for using coated strings in the studio.

Curt Mangan's coated sets are also very good in my experience, but there's a wealth of coated sets to choose from including D'Addario's XS set and Rotosound's Nexus range. Try a few and see which works best for you.

5. Take The Work Seriously

This project showed me the importance of taking the recording and yourself, in an artistic sense, seriously. I don't mean you should be an unpleasable perfectionist or, God forbid, a prima donna – but simply accept that you are a real artist, as entitled as any other to make a record, who has a clear vision of what they want to achieve. If you have a sound in your head you really want to bring into the world, dig deep for it. Go the extra mile to get it recorded just as you envisioned it. No-one else is going to make the record you have in your heart and mind; you are uniquely qualified to do it. So rehearse the material to a sharp edge before you even set foot in the studio – be fully ready. Then, when the moment comes, you can deliver a fluent, expressive performance full of drama and grace.

I could go on, but I don't want to bore you! I'll only add that getting album cover art done professionally felt like a good move, even though it was another expense to factor in. And if you're thinking of selling or sharing your record via digital platforms such as iTunes and Spotify, I highly recommend using a one-stop digital distribution service such as DistroKid. For a few quid a year they'll publish your work to all the major digital marketplaces in one go after you've given them all the relevant files, art and info – a great labour saver.

Thanks for listening to the story of my little album and I hope it may have inspired you to consider making a record yourself, if you haven't already. And if you should feel like listening to *Withershins* now that it's finished, I could ask for no finer reward.

Withershins by Jamie Dickson is available now on iTunes and other digital platforms

https://bit.ly/withershins_album

THREE TO GET READY

Useful Accessories For The Studio

PHOTO: WWW.GUITARGUITAR.CO.UK

Cooperstand Pro-G Collapsible Guitar Stand £59

Nothing worse than knocking guitars flying in the studio, so a nice secure guitar stand is a must. These little wooden Cooperstands, made of African sapele, are small enough when folded to fit in a gigbag front pocket and they'll securely hold both electrics and acoustics on the closed-cell neoprene pads that line each leg. They look a fair bit nicer than clunky black metal stands, too.

Snark ST-8 Titanium £32.99

In the heat of recording the last thing you want to do is get a really nice take down only to find that your tuning is a little off and it then bugs you forever. The solution is to keep a little clip-on tuner primed and ready on the headstock. Few are as unfussily good as Snark's inexpensive models, and its latest 'Titanium' model is handily rechargeable and also has a specially designed casing that helps prevent ambient noise from throwing the reading off.

PHOTO WWW.STRINGSDIRECT.CO.UK

GHS Fast-Fret Guitar String Cleaner & Lubricant £8.99

As mentioned, it will do you no harm if your strings are slick and gunge-free when you head into the studio. A quick application of Fast-Fret is your friend here, ensuring that your fingers will glide over the fretboard without squeaks and that the strings will perform at their best. Best of all, a stick of the stuff lasts forever. A gigbag essential.

AUDIO ▶ http://bit.ly/guitaristextra

Secondary Dominants

Richard Barrett embarks upon some jargon busting as he explains the mystery behind secondary dominants

Not all chord progressions stay strictly within the diatonic/chord scale convention – and that's a good thing. Taking a little look at the theory involved here, the C major diatonic/chord scale is Cmaj-Dmin-Emin-Fmaj-Gmaj-Amin-B diminished (Bm7♭5 is also commonly used). These are often numbered sequentially using Roman numerals, so a II-V-I progression in C translates as Dm-Gmaj-Cmaj and so on. The 'resolve' from V to I in a chord progression is a very popular move. Let's embellish it a bit and say the V is a V7, short for dominant 7 – namely a V chord with the ♭7 added. In C, G7 is the dominant (V7) that resolves to Cmaj (I).

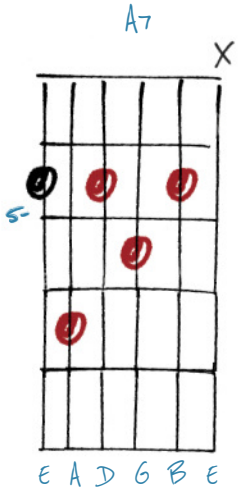
But what if we take this move and apply it to all the other chords in the diatonic scale, and so pretend each chord in the scale (whether major or minor) is chord I and play its V7 first? In the way that G7 resolves to C, A7 would be the dominant to Dm if it were chord I (actually chord II), or B7 to Em (actually chord III). This is known as using a 'secondary dominant'. More on this below!

Paul McCartney has created some unusual but harmonious progressions using this musical device

PHOTO BY CHRIS PUTNAM/FUTURE PUBLISHING VIA GETTY IMAGES

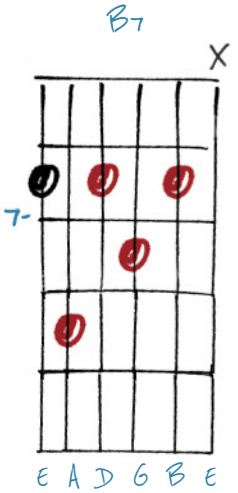
Example 1

Using Cmaj as our home key, our first secondary dominant is A7, as this is chord V7 to D. Played between chord I (Cmaj) and chord II (Dm) as Cmaj-A7-Dm, the A7 sets up the Dm in the same way that G7 sets us up for Cmaj. It resolves in a similar way to playing Dsus4 then Dmaj, as an example.



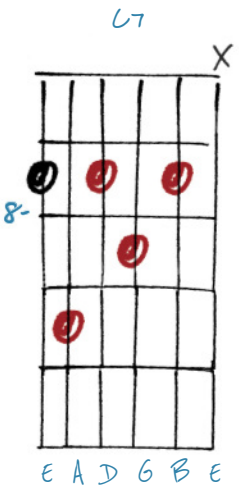
Example 2

Coming straight from Dm (chord II), our next diatonic chord would be Em (chord III). If we want to insert another secondary dominant here between Dm and Em, we would add B7, which is chord V in the key of E. So the next part of the sequence would be Dm-B7-Em.



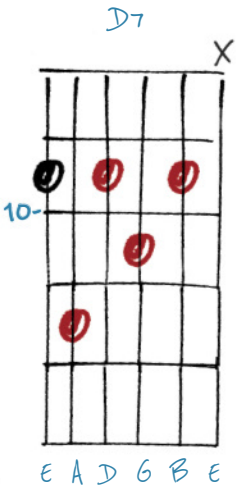
Example 3

C7 is the dominant (V7) in the key of F, so this becomes the secondary dominant, giving us the option of an elegant stepping stone between Em (chord II) and Fmaj (chord IV). Play Em-C7-Fmaj in sequence and you'll hear the secondary dominant at work again.



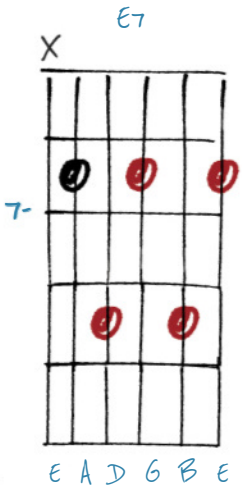
Example 4

This D7 is V7 in the key of G, so inserting it between Fmaj (chord IV) and G (chord V) gives us our next secondary dominant idea: Fmaj-D7-Gmaj. We're pretending the Gmaj is our chord I, leading us to incorporate chords from other keys that sound interesting but harmonious.



Example 5

This E7 is V7 in the key of A, here pressed into service as the secondary dominant to Am, the VI chord. Play Gmaj-E7-Am in sequence and you'll hear it in action. We've only really scratched the surface with these ideas, but hopefully it gives a fresh viewpoint on how chords and harmony can work for you in your own compositions.



MARK KNOPFLER
ONE DEEP RIVER

THE NEW ALBUM
12.04.24

EMI

BRITISH GROVE STUDIOS

Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.
Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

STAR LETTER

AMERICAN DREAM?

I bought a Mexican Strat for £329 as a teenager back in 2002. A Strat fan, I always had in mind that I'd upgrade to the 'real thing', a USA Strat, when I could afford it, but never got round to it. Playing more recently, I finally made it along to the local guitar shop and tried out a couple of Professional II models and an Ultra. They were great to play, but, on reflection, were not the step up I was expecting from my Mexican Strat.

The Ultra's neck was nice and the heel shape with better upper-fret access is a good feature, but back home my Mexican has a neck that actually feels more slimline and easier to play. The big difference was on the bridge pickup, which sounded fuller with more sustain, the noise-cancelling making a big difference. The ability to add the neck pickup in also sounds really great here.

The Sunburst and Arctic White finishes on the new models look great, but again my Midnight Blue with a rosewood neck – and some pleasing dents and bashes – still feels special, too. I'm probably being a bit sentimental about my long-standing friend, but the £2k upgrade didn't seem worth it. I'm thinking instead of upgrading the pickups, with the option to blend the neck in with the middle and bridge if possible. Does that sound sensible? Am I missing something about the US models?
Nick Seeley

Nick, your thoughts on all of the above touch on some really important matters. In the final analysis, the only guitars you should own and buy, if you want to be satisfied, are ones you just click with. That feeling of connection usually happens instantly and it isn't necessarily about price, country of origin or cachet – the editor of this tome has had that feeling of connection with both a £4k Patrick James Eggle Macon and an old Antoria Les Paul Junior copy worth only a few hundred pounds. So perhaps we should try to set aside our preconceptions about what is 'better' and try not to feel that we *must* inexorably rise higher up the escalator of a maker's guitar ranges as we pass through life.

If you try a USA Fender or even a Custom Shop model and love it to bits then go for it. But if you're happy with your MIM Strat as is, there's no law (or indeed sense in) saying you have to spend £2,000 on a US replacement. Okay, if you want to just treat yourself to something cool, new and shiny, then fine. But you don't need to do it.

As to whether new pickups would be good, we would ask what it is you think the current ones lack, if anything? Again, you may not need to change them. However, quality pickups from makers such as Bare Knuckle, DiMarzio, Lollar and others will often bring something extra to the voice and feel of a factory-spec guitar. But try to be analytical about what you want from any upgrade and, where possible, talk to the maker about which pickups meet your exact needs before pushing the button.

VOX AMPLIFICATION LTD.

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!
www.voxamps.com

Angelo Proni's custom-built offset was inspired by Ron Kirn's Telemaster

OFFSET IN MOTION

I greatly enjoyed issue 509 on offsets – a body style that is manifestly becoming increasingly mainstream, also thanks to more recent illustrious endorsements. That said, I was surprised to see no mention, or even passing reference, to offset T-style models: ie, Telecaster hardware, configuration and neck, all of which applied to an offset body shape. So let me fill that gap with a quick show and tell.

As a dyed-in-the wool Tele player, I first stumbled upon the offset Tele concept via the TDPRI forum and a certain Mr Ron Kirn's 'Telemaster' more than a decade ago, which absolutely blew me away and slowly made its way into my GAS fantasies over time. Then Fender produced the offset Tele.

Cut to the attached pic [above] – my own custom-made offset T-style. I sourced all the parts online, had the body finished by RF Custom (Candy Apple Red, poly), oil and wax-finished the neck myself, and had it put together by my trusty luthier, Mr Tim Marten, here in London. It features a four-way switch, Fender Custom Shop Nocaster pickups, Kluson vintage-style tuners, domed knobs (gotta have those), generous

James's striking Fender American Professional II Jazzmaster (near right) came into his care following a charity raffle conducted by UK label 4AD, in aid of War Child. The guitar itself was built to celebrate the label's 40th anniversary and features designer Chris Brigg's cover artwork from the compilation album, *Bills & Aches & Blues (40 Years Of 4AD)*

D-profile one-piece maple neck, cost about £1,200 all in and six months' production time from start to finish.

Am I happy with it? Take a wild guess... The only problem is that now I want a spare in Lake Placid Blue with a black pearloid 'guard. Help!

Angelo Proni

Thanks for sending in your creation inspired by Fender's mash-up of Jazzmaster and Tele, Angelo. There are quite a few companies that specialise in exploring such happy collisions of classic design cues. Kauer Guitars comes to mind, with its Tele-meets-Les Paul Korona model, or Novo Guitars with its offset Les Paul Junior-style Nucleus Solus M1 model. But Tele-meets-Jazzmaster style guitars seem to hang together particularly well and offer classic sounds in a package that offers a different playing experience and very cool looks. Be interested to hear from players of this style of guitar if they feel the larger body has any influence on its voice.

JAZZED FOR OFFSETS

Writing in to say how much I enjoyed the offset issue. Some of my favourite artists – Sonic Youth, Television, Dinosaur Jr – all used Jazzmasters, and it was enlightening to read about their history. I went to see PJ Harvey a few years ago, and she and the two guitarists had Jazzmasters strapped on throughout the set and it looked fantastic. I wanted to give a shout out to offset Telecasters, too, which offer the Tele sound with great looks and nice access to the high frets.

My Jazzmaster [above right] was commissioned by the 4AD record label to commemorate an anniversary, and I was lucky to win it in a charity raffle. I currently have it tuned FACGBF, inspired by Yvonne Young, which is pushing things in some interesting directions.

I want to finish this note by acknowledging the photography in the magazine. The photo of the Lake Placid Blue Jazzer was just sensational! Looking at the photos is one of the highlights of the printed mag.

James Hayward

Thanks for the kind words, James, and interesting to see you join Angelo Proni above in singing the praises of the Tele/Jazzmaster hybrid. Maybe not only *Guitarist* but Fender is missing a trick by not upping production! Your rather special Jazzmaster looks great, too – there are few guitars cooler than a tasty-looking JM and we praise your adventures in alternative tunings, we expect they sound immense on it.

PHOTO BY ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The unique talents of the late Ollie Halsall (pictured right, performing with the band Boxer in 1976, featuring vocalist Mike Patto) went under the radar, but he was known as a guitarists' guitarist

In his short life, Jimmy McCulloch (pictured below in 1974, five years before his death, aged 26) made an impact with Wings, Small Faces and Stone The Crows, among others

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

UNSUNG HEROES

Reading your Denny Laine obit in issue 508, I noticed guitarist Jimmy McCulloch as part of the Wings line-up in the accompanying photo. Jimmy, who featured in those *Rolling Stone* magazine '100 Best Guitarists' lists in the 70s, is not much remembered these days. A reassessment would be timely and in order. Jimmy had a remarkable, if short, career from the child guitar prodigy who was taken under the wing of Pete Townshend to Thunderclap Newman, John Mayall, Stone The Crows, Wings, Small Faces and The Dukes. His solo on the live version of *Maybe I'm Amazed* is legendary, although his most up-front playing is probably to be found in the *Stone The Crows: In Concert* DVD.

I would love to see a *Guitarist* article on Jimmy. His biography *Little Wing: The Jimmy McCulloch Story* by Paul Salley is an excellent place to start.

Mick Lamont

Regarding unsung/forgotten guitarists, how about Ollie Halsall of Patto? He was the reason I bought a walnut SG Custom with gold hardware and a Bigsby from Selmer, even though his was white. I never came close to figuring out what he played. John Etheridge is one of the only guys who still mentions him.

Steve Mitchell

Thanks so much to both Mick and Steve for their excellent suggestions of Jimmy McCulloch and Ollie Halsall following last month's request for unsung heroes we might take a look at in a regular column. Hallsall's style was so unique and unpredictable – it's such a rare quality to take so many risks and really let fly with them. Jimmy McCulloch, meanwhile, was the quintessential tasteful, soulful, song-lifting presence on guitar that can be the backbone of a band. Oh to have such an assured feel for melody and timing. Great guitarists both. Keep the suggestions, and the memories, coming.

Reader Adrian North's music straddles the fretboard and the keyboard, so he's keen to see a *Guitarist* meets *Computer Music* spin-off

BRAVE NEW 'GUITARIST'?

Congratulations on reaching your 40th anniversary and I really hope you're all delighted at having such lasting success. I've just done the 40th anniversary survey and it prompted me to suggest something I've been wondering about for a wee while. Reading the survey it looks as though you're wondering whether to go forward with the 'classic era' version of the magazine (Clapton, Gibson, drive pedals) versus keeping an eye on the future, and this is where my suggestion originates.

I read *Guitarist* via Apple Music. As I play a lot of ambient music I also read *Computer Music*. My own music is guitar focused but uses plug-ins and Logic Pro extensively. I'm one of your respondents to the survey who has never bought an amp, and neither do I own any effects pedals. I would love to see a hybrid of *Guitarist* and *Computer Music* that certainly covers new guitar design and technology (such as groundbreaking effects pedals) but also plug-ins, DAW techniques, groundbreaking musicians irrespective of their preferred instrument (since most of us use a

keyboard as well as a fretboard) and other aspects of audio processing. I use all of these in my music as do many other people, of course. If there is a new MIDI interface or plug-in, then I'm more interested in that than a new drive pedal.

For what it's worth, *Guitarist* is still the magazine I look out for, but would be great to see a spin-off that is really future-facing.

Adrian North

Thanks for the kind words and interesting suggestions, Adrian. While I don't know if a whole new publication on the interface between tech and guitar could be launched in the near future, we do publish regular supplements on subjects such as acoustic guitar, buyer's guides and so on which accompany the main edition from time to time. Would readers like to see one dedicated to the topics Adrian has usefully suggested? Or even a cover feature on the subject? If so, let us know and we'll look into it.

MOD JOB

I'm a regular reader of your mag and I've been building and modifying guitars now for about 40 years. The guitar I thought you may like to see is a highly modified Strat copy [pictured right]. The body has added contours and is finished in Ford Electric Orange. The headstock has been reshaped and the electrics consist of a Seymour Duncan Little '59 in the neck and a modified home-built 'Burns Trisonic' for the bridge. Then there's a three-way mini-toggle selector switch, CTS pots and an Orange tone cap.

Paul Cooper

What an amazing creation, Paul – kudos for completing this ambitious project and coming up with something completely distinctive with a very useful range of tones we'd wager. A very useful tool for rock and more with, in our experience at least, a unique pickup combination. We'd love to hear it some time!

THE PLANE TRUTH

Much as this may be of little concern to your readers, as a professional forester and fully paid-up member of the National Pedantry Society, I feel compelled to point out that London Plane is not a hybridised form of sycamore as Alex Bishop says in 'Knock On Wood' (issue 508). Whilst the sycamore we have here in the UK is indeed a type of maple, and even though Americans refer to their plane trees as sycamore, the London Plane is, in fact, entirely unrelated to maple.

Cameron S Crook

Thank you for your very polite but illuminating correction, Cameron. A mildly abashed Alex sent his thanks and these words in reply: "Haha! Brilliant – glad to be put right on that one. It's always going to be the technical tree stuff I'm most likely to get wrong. Woodworkers have been mixing up species for years. I also welcome the fact the tone is much friendlier than the average YouTube comments section!"

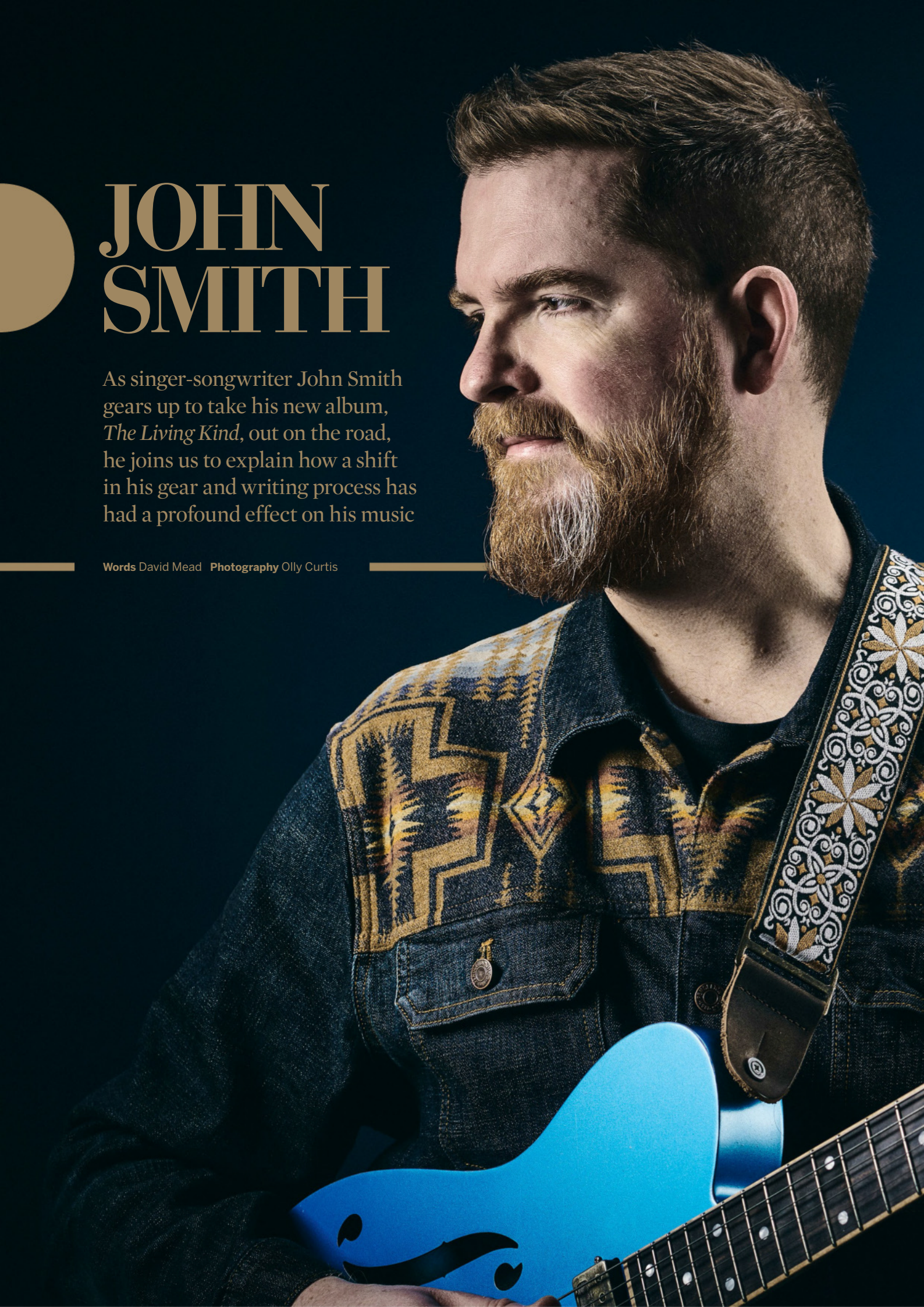
Paul Cooper's striking Ford Electric Orange S-style is a culmination of many years' experience of modding and building

Send Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

JOHN SMITH

As singer-songwriter John Smith gears up to take his new album, *The Living Kind*, out on the road, he joins us to explain how a shift in his gear and writing process has had a profound effect on his music

Words David Mead **Photography** Olly Curtis



It's a case of all change for John Smith. Not only has he just released a brand-new album, he's also reorganised his touring gear to include a specially designed thinline Fylde electro-acoustic as a one-size-fits-all solution for his acoustic repertoire. But there's also a custom electric guitar joining the party, as well as an effects array more associated with a metal act. What the heck is going on?

The new album, *The Living Kind*, is very band orientated, but John is still planning to tour the material as a one-man unit. "So that my solo show is not just me and an acoustic guitar, like it used to be, I'm trying to make it much more three-dimensional: stereo effects, very tasty pedals," he tells us during his visit to *Guitarist* HQ. "The long and short of it is taking a band on the road is hard and expensive. I think I can do this. Well, I'm gonna try..."

What were the origins of the new album?

"Back in 2011, I met [*The Living Kind* producer] Joe Henry for the first time. I'd been drafted in to play guitar on *Passenger* by Lisa Hannigan and over the course of that album [produced by Joe Henry], Joe and I became good friends. Since then he's been a brother, a mentor and a very significant influence in my musical life. I've always wanted to make a record with him, and just after lockdown lifted back in 2022, I was on tour in the States, so I stopped in with Joe.

"After dinner one night, we sat by the fire and wrote this song called *Lily*, then went upstairs and demoed it. He said, 'You know, there's no reason why we can't make a record in here.' He has a music room above his garage; it's not a studio, it's just a playing and writing room that is subject to the elements. If a truck goes past outside, you hear it. But we were in the middle of winter and there were no trucks outside, there was just cold and snow and a very dead sound. He said, 'If you can write a record, just do it.'

"One of Joe's magic tricks is to get people and make them feel very natural in the studio, so they're able just to express themselves; I've always been excited about trying that with him. So I wrote the songs and they just kind of came out. It was like as soon as you turned on the tap, or you put up your antenna or whatever, the songs started flowing. I went into the studio with about 20 songs and we chiselled it down to 12, and 10 went on the record."

That sounds like a very positive and speedy process.

"All the songs were really fresh, really felt very potent in my mind, because some of them I'd only played three or four times.

But I went in pretty well rehearsed. And then as we played through things and listened to them, Joe would say, 'Well, why don't you try it on that guitar?' or 'Why don't you just try singing it and pick up the guitar in a second?' So he was steering the ship and I was just on the deck, singing and playing. I realised what was happening, he was producing me, but it felt like I was just playing and singing, quite carefree, while he was guiding things towards the destination."

How did you recruit the other players on the album?

"I'd never met the bass player, never played with him before. He's Ross Gallagher; he was Paula Cole's bass player. He's based in New York and he'd driven up with Joe's son Levon who's a great sax and clarinet player and he plays with Julian Lage. Ross and I cut the songs live. Joe said, 'Why don't you guys try playing *Dividing Line*?' I think that was the first one we did and we played through it and Joe said, 'That's the take.' Ross was very instinctively following me around and dancing with me in a way that it's taken me years to establish with bass players in the past.

"So then I overdubbed some guitars and Levon would open up his clarinets and saxophones and, when we had the bare bones of the record, we sent it out to Jay Bellerose in Los Angeles, who is Robert Plant's drummer. Patrick Warren [keyboards and strings] I know through playing with Joe, but Patrick has played with everyone; Joshua Van Tassel [drums, percussion] up in Toronto, he plays with Donovan Woods, he put down some drums on the track *Candle*. So then we had a pretty complete picture.

> *"In four days we'd cut the record, and in two days of remote recording it was complete. It happened very quickly and naturally"*

"I didn't write a lot of string arrangements because it felt like the songs had really come through quite a journey in the four days that we'd recorded them. So I just sent a couple to Patrick and said, 'Look, if you have any ideas for potential strings, put them on here.' In four days we'd cut the record, and in two days of remote recording it was complete. It happened very quickly and very naturally in a pure burst of creativity. Totally amazing to me that it happened like that."

There's a distinct shift towards you playing more electric guitar on this album. How did that come about?

"In a word: Mule. Matt Eich, in Saginaw, Michigan, builds these incredible guitars out of steel. I knew he existed because we had spoken in 2017 when I was promoting *Headlong* in Seattle. He wrote to me and said, 'Hey, man, just to let you know, I really love what you do. And I built these Resophonic guitars...' I wrote back and said, 'I know who you are because of Kelly Joe Phelps.' You know, my hero and friend Kelly Joe played a Mule so I knew of this amazing guitar on [Kelly Joe Phelps'] *Brother Sinner And The Whale*. Later on, I found out through watching Joey Landreth that Matt had started building electric guitars. And then I learned about this Mavis guitar that he was building. I said I'd love to try a Mavis and he sent me one and I wrote a bunch of songs. It's an instrument where songs just fall out of it, you know?

"Maybe six months later I wrote to him and said, 'Look, I'm in love with this thing. I need one of your electric hollowbodies.' I was going back to the States and I picked up the Mulecaster. I got it home and something different started happening. Whereas I'd written a bunch of songs on the Mavis and I thought I was going to make a record on the Mavis, I actually parked a lot of that

1. John's new Fylde thinline acoustic is petite enough to fit in a double gigbag alongside his Mulecaster electric for overseas touring

2. Another touring companion is a Benson Nathan amp (top right) with its no-nonsense control layout (below)

3. Nicknamed 'The Smithcaster', the Fylde thinline custom was specially built by Roger Bucknall. It features a redwood top with a highly figured Asian ebony back and sides

4. Matt Eich of Mule Resophonic Guitars in Saginaw, Michigan, is the man behind John's new Mulecaster T-Style

"I was going back to the States and I picked up the Mulecaster. I got it home and something different started happening…"

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5. Among the guitars that John takes out on the road in the UK is this Collings 470 JL Julian Lage signature model

6. The Mavis was John's introduction to Mule Resophonic guitars

7. John's Schmidt Array UK touring pedalboard is controlled by a GigRig G3 and features a Quad Cortex by Neural DSP

8. A look under the hood of the 'board reveals a host of other effects John uses on the road

9. The Mulecaster proved to be an inspiration for many of the songs on the new album

material because the stuff that started coming out of the Mulecaster felt even more relevant to what I wanted to say for this new record. All those riffs that are on the record came out with the Mulecaster in the first eight weeks of owning it. An amazing instrument that weighs a ton but sounds utterly timeless and three dimensional. So half the record came with that, the other half I recorded on my Fylde Falstaff, the guitar that I've used on every record I've made since 2009."

Touring with multiple guitars is always a problem when you're a soloist. Was your new Fylde 'Smithcaster' acoustic a way of getting around the problem?

"Yeah, it's a problem. I'm independent, I don't have a crew, I don't have a guitar tech. When I'm in the UK and I've got my car, I'll take three or four guitars out with me. When I'm in the US, I generally take one. I was talking to Roger Bucknall about how to get around this and I've been keeping my eye on thinline acoustic guitars and the development of that kind of instrument by some of the bigger manufacturers and wondering how it can be done in a way that suits my sound.

"Roger and I developed this idea of a thinline acoustic guitar that still has a microphone inside so that I can hit it and get that bass drum hit and get the air moving around the sound – I can't stand just a piezo signal. So we put my stereo LR Baggs pickup in this guitar – half piezo, half mic, take all the treble out of the piezo, some of the bass off the mic – and between those two things, you get what sounds almost like an acoustic guitar. The idea now is that I can travel with my Mulecaster and my thinline Fylde in a double gigbag, and then go fly. We're going to America in a couple of weeks to try this idea out and see if I can play my whole gig on those two guitars."

"The riffs came out with the Mulecaster. An amazing instrument that weighs a ton but sounds utterly timeless"

Have you added to your pedalboard in order to tour the new album?

"The main 'board is housed in this Schmidt Array that's actually been built for me to my specification, which is amazing. I've got all of my effects on there, all wired up by The GigRig. It's the mothership, housed in this beautiful handmade timber 'board by Schmidt Array in Germany. I'll also probably take my Benson Nathan amp on the road as well because I just love the sound of that thing.

"Meanwhile, I've managed to condense my travel 'board into two pedals. Thanks to Neural DSP I've got a Quad Cortex, on which I've managed to approximate the [Strymon] Blue Sky and the El Capitan. It's got EQs, so I can mix my pickups and do all my signal routing off one guitar cable for my acoustic and my electric. So the four or five pedals I used to have to take on a 'board that weighed a ton now fit in a suitcase. It's now just all on the Quad Cortex, which is a total revelation. I've only seen it used by metalheads previously, but then Jenn Butterworth, the great trad guitar player, explained she had started using it just for acoustic work and it got me thinking...

"I spoke to Neural and it seems that actually I could put my rig just on that one unit. So I've got that and an expression pedal, and I can approximate much of my bigger 'board, my UK pedalboard, just on a little 18-inch Templeboards fly rig." G

John Smith's new album, *The Living Kind*, is available now via Commoner/Thirty Tigers ***www.johnsmithjohnsmith.com***

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

RIVER DEEP

Mark Knopfler is at an interesting crossroads in his life and music. He's just sold most of his **guitar collection** and he's got a **new album** out that's as deep in emotion and storycraft as its title suggests. As you'd expect, it's also got some sublime guitar on it, though Knopfler himself believes his playing became "rusty" during the pandemic and is still in recovery. On the eve of the release of his new long-player, ***One Deep River***, we join him to hear his perspectives on songcraft, gangland Britain in the 1960s, his enduring relationship with the **Stratocaster**, and the guitars that he couldn't let go...

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Joby Sessions

This April will see the release of Mark Knopfler's 10th solo album since he struck out on his own with *Golden Heart* in 1996. Dire Straits had disbanded the year before and you'd have been forgiven for thinking, at that moment in time, that his best years were perhaps behind him. But it says much of Knopfler's musical integrity that both the depth and quality of his work have only improved in the 30 years that have passed since then.

In fact, listening to his latest album, *One Deep River*, you get a sense of an artist who – strange as it might seem to say – has quietly revealed the real mettle of his songcraft in his post-Straits solo work. *Money For Nothing* may have made him a household name, but ballads such as *Matchstick Man* from his 2018 album, *Down The Road Wherever*, or *Basil* from 2015's *Tracker* are masterpieces of powerful, mature ballad writing. There's humility, grace and nuance in their unhurried stories and poignantly phrased guitar lines that hold the listener's attention like a fireside story or a personal confession.

So it was all the more intriguing to learn that, just after selling the majority of his guitar collection at Christie's in London for a record total (25 per cent of which went to charity) in January, he announced a new album, *One Deep River*, to be released on 12 April. Would this be a swan song, then? A final statement on his life in music? Happily the answer seems to be 'no' – but it's fair to say that the album's songs cast longer shadows than those of his previous two records.

Thematically, the album is full of departures – from relationships, from towns, from life itself – and its 12 tracks are haunted by the uneasy presence of mobsters, scam artists and stick-up men. Yet the songs are as unhurried and beautifully performed as ever, while the addition of slide maestro Greg Leisz lends it some of the melancholic grandeur of a movie soundtrack set somewhere in the American West. And, of course, it has those unmistakable moments of guitar that only Knopfler seems to be able to deliver, saying much with just a few notes that always make the listener *feel* something, rather than just another ego-buffing solo.

And yet joining Mark to talk about the album we find him – perhaps surprisingly for a man who's a hero to so many players – musing on what he calls his "rusty" technique and ongoing struggles to stay engaged with playing the guitar while he works on the deep craft of lyric writing. Introspective yet frank, his thoughts on where he's at with guitar and music are as absorbing as the new album, so join us as we wade a little deeper into Knopfler's views on music, guitars and recording.

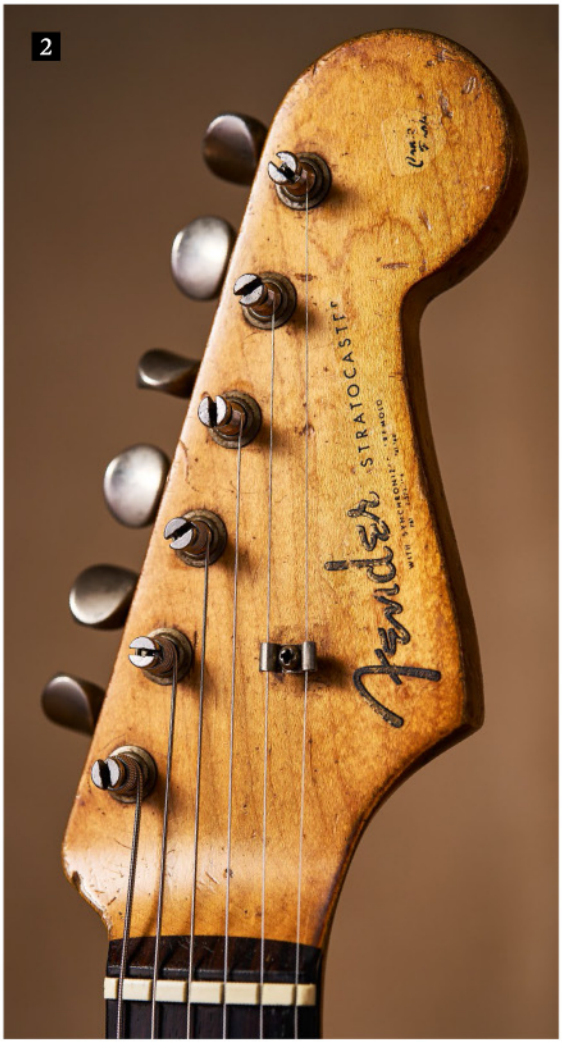
"Some guitars are just that little bit special... You wouldn't want to sell them because they'd be too hard to say goodbye to"

Mark's original 1961 Fender Stratocaster with rosewood 'board, famously used to record *Sultans Of Swing*. Its voice, for many, remains the definitive Knopfler sound and it was acquired by Mark in 1977. It is perhaps no surprise that it was not among the guitars put up for sale at Christie's in January

"The musician part [of me] is much reduced, I think, but the writer part is as strong as ever. It's not that I've forgotten how to play, I'm just rusty"

1. The '61 Strat is beautifully and naturally aged and is an icon of his early Dire Straits work. In 1995 Mark told *Guitarist*, however, that *Sultans* was written on a National resonator and the arrangement was originally quite different to the version on the Strat, which became so celebrated

2. With a slab 'board and spaghetti logo, not only is this 1961 guitar famous for the music recorded with it, it's also many people's idea of the definitive 60s Stratocaster spec



Congratulations on the album. It feels like you're playing more Strat on it, such as on the single *Ahead Of The Game*, than we've heard from you for a while.
"Yeah, I think that was the old '54. Oh, I'm sure it's a pretty backward kind of an approach. But, you know, I've always been a soft touch for something like that – a little figure [simple melodic pattern] like that."

Does a Strat still feel like 'home' to you after all these years, given that there's another big strand of your work that's played with Gibson electrics and the like?
"I think I'm equally at home with either. I mean, not that I'm at home with [any] guitar now. I've looked at so many words over the past few years, through the pandemic and beyond, that I'm hardly playing. My guitar playing has become a real passenger. So when I sit down to look at songs, I'm always just looking at lyrics, that's where I am, really. I tend to be more interested in the song that I'm just writing, a song that I've just finished writing, or the song that I'm just in the middle of writing. So that's where I'll be and it won't be practising [guitar]. So I'm afraid that's the truth of it."

Do you find that as time goes by there's more you want to write about – in terms of subject matter – or, in fact, less?
"Well, I've certainly been writing more songs and I don't know whether that was [specifically] to do with the pandemic or not, or because I just had more time. But it certainly hasn't helped my playing any. The musician part [of me] is much reduced, I think, but the writer part is as strong as ever. If a song wants to be born, then I try to let it happen, but I think the playing has deteriorated a little bit... I'd [find I'd] be ready to sit down and look at a song on the computer, but I wouldn't be playing enough. But that's just something that seems to have happened recently, and I should really take steps to spend more time behind the instrument, to just get playing. It's not that I've forgotten how to play it – I'm just rusty."

Guitar is funny – it kind of waxes and wanes a bit in every player's life. It's a real lifelong relationship, with ups and downs.
"It is, and it's often how you just start off. So the first good move for me is to get the damn thing out of the case. Certainly, for me, if it's in the case I'll often just start looking at the song, rather than looking at the guitar. So I'll try to keep an acoustic

and an electric on stands so that I can just reach for them and play and I don't have to start picking up the case, hitting somebody's chair with it, getting the guitar out, knocking something off another stand as you're sitting down again... The whole thing is just kind of cumbersome. So I like to have a couple of guitars out of their cases and on stands, and that way they've got a fighting chance of getting played."

Your 2015 album, *Tracker*, was full of songs about people who could be described as unsung heroes, such as the Irish labourer in *Mighty Man* or the poet Basil Bunting. By contrast, the new album has a lot of villains in it, such as the murderous train robbers on the track *Tunnel 13*. Why?

"I don't know... I suppose it may be just getting older and looking at the world. And I suppose, even in terms of social history, I've been looking at a certain period, which was a kind of a pivotal time in Britain. I wrote a song once called *5:15am*. It was about a miner coming onto his shift and he came across this car, a big Jag Mark X, and inside it was a man whose body was full of bullet holes.

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3. British social history inspired a lot of the album's themes, especially the emergence of gangland crime in the Northeast of England in the 1960s

4. The Gibson Custom Shop's ageing work includes numerous fine details aiming to reproduce Mark's original 1958 Lester

This was the introduction to the Northeast of that kind of gangland killing, which was really about the fruit-machine [racket] that had come up from London. And so in a roundabout way, I suppose I've been reading about that period.

"There was a revolution in Cuba and the Mob had to do a quick reverse out of there and start up again, and London was the kicking-off point. So then the nightclub scene changed and the Gambling Act was brought into place so that those guys could start operating.... I'd started to read about that stuff way back a couple albums ago, and it's still an interesting period to me. A lot of people lost their innocence during that time. Sometimes they lost their bank accounts, too [laughs].

"'One Deep River' could be a description of a person or the river itself. I like the idea of [a range of possible meanings]"

"Actually, there were some extra tunes from this album and I suddenly realised that I could take four of

"I like the idea of writing a good song: the challenge being to do that and the other challenge being to make a good record of it"

This is the first prototype of Mark's 2016 Gibson Custom Shop Mark Knopfler '58 Les Paul Standard based on his original 1958 'Burst, which remains in his keeping. It was used to record *Janine* on Mark's new album and was also used to perform *Money For Nothing* and *Going Home* live on tour in 2019

"The [forthcoming] EP features songs that combine thematically, about fairgrounds and showgrounds and vanishing boxing booths"

The 2004 Fender Stratocaster is a 1954-spec model made to commemorate the Strat's (then) 50th anniversary. It has toured with Knopfler's and Neil Diamond's sideman Richard Bennett, who played it from 2005 to 2019. Knopfler used this on the tracks *Tunnel 13* and *Before My Train Comes* on the new album, while Richard Bennett played it on the track *This One's Not Going To End Well*

those songs and make them into an EP [*The Boy*, out 20 April], which is yet to come out. It's just songs that combine thematically, about the fairgrounds and showgrounds and the vanishing boxing booths [boxing booths pitted veteran fighters who journeyed from town to town against onlookers brave enough to challenge them in the ring – Ed]. There were once many, many hundreds of them, but they were trying to introduce the British Boxing Board Of Control to control it more – and also the showground culture.

"I was always fascinated by the fairground that came to Newcastle once a year when I was a boy and, of course, it had its boxing booth, too – so that time was quite interesting. There's a song on the EP called *Mr Solomons Said* and a song about a bad day for a knife thrower and [narratives about] people who were attracted to the bright lights of London, maybe like the boy who'd cycled in from the countryside. So it's just where I'm at now."

"Greg Leisz is a phenomenal player and straight away it felt as though he'd been with us for a long, long time – it was an instantaneous thing"

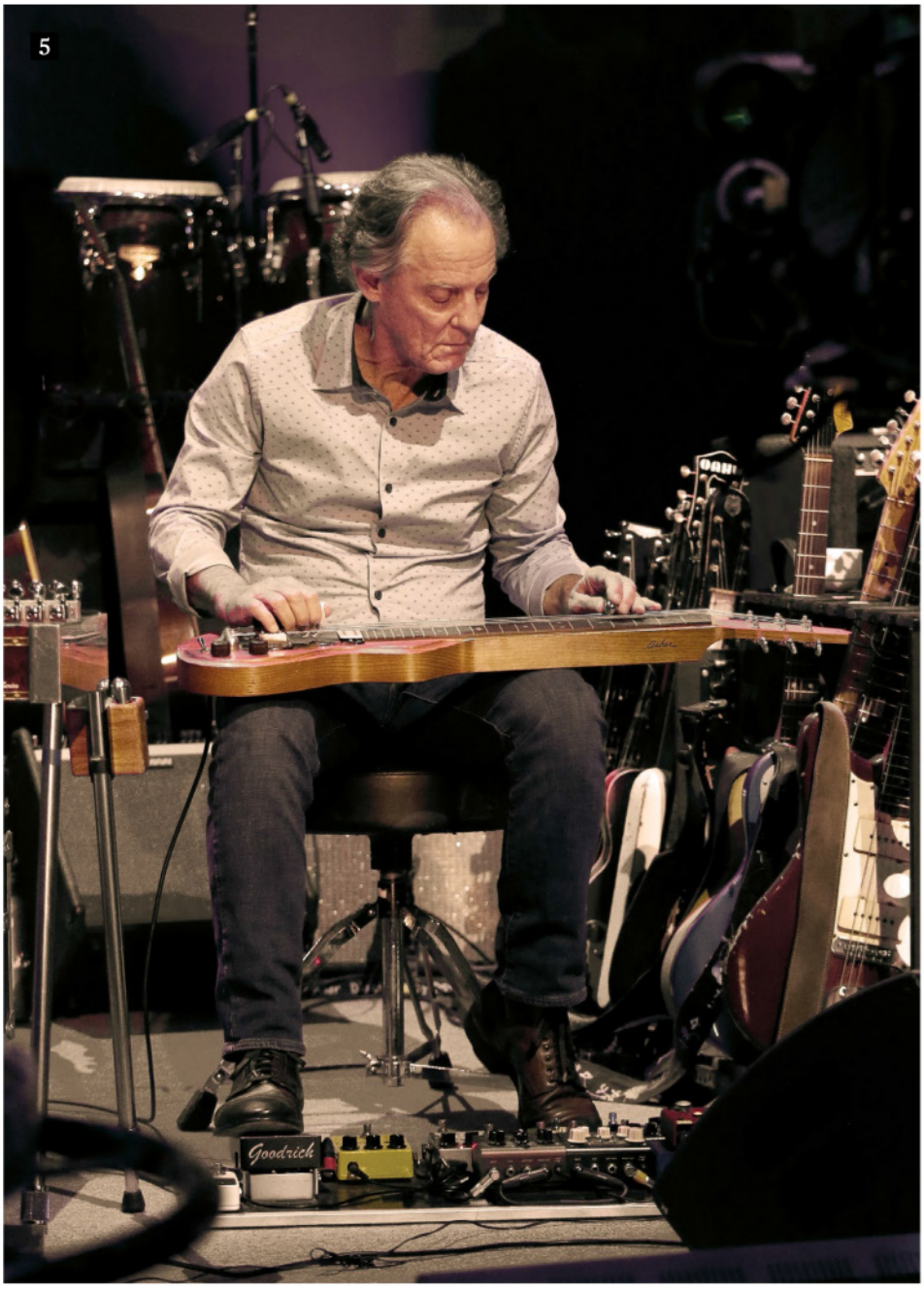
You called the album *One Deep River*. What does it mean to you?
"Well, what does it mean to you? It could be a description of a person, or it could be a description of the river itself. So, you know, I like the idea of it being available across the range [of possible meanings]."

With lyrics, you have to leave a certain amount open to interpretation by the listener. Otherwise, it becomes a bit trite.
"Yeah, that's right. And very often, you know, if you try to explain the song to somebody I've found that just gets you in deeper."

The album also sounds like the most Americana-influenced record you've done in a while, on tracks like *Janine* and *Before My Train Comes*. The superb lap steel playing from Greg Leisz certainly evokes that melancholy Western feeling. Would it be fair to say that's a theme?
"Yeah, well, it's never very far away. Greg is a phenomenal player and straight away it felt as though he'd been with us for a long, long time so he didn't need to become assimilated – it was an instantaneous thing. With this band, it's the high point of a year when they get together and, with Greg, it was just *more* of that. I don't give directions [to musicians such as Greg Leisz]...

"If you're directing Colin Farrell or someone you don't say, 'I'd like you to walk over to the window, lean out and then I'd like you to scratch your head and look as though you don't know what you're doing...' That's the last thing you would tell a good actor to do. Because what he would be doing would be thinking about a possible approach, thinking about things that might or might not work, and possibly discussing it with you at some point but not needing to have a set of directions put in his lap. And it's the same thing with these guys. I just sing them the song and leave them to it, really, and then just keep an eye on what's unfolding and maybe nudge things in certain directions, possibly.

"But that's part of the joy of it – welcoming people into your song and them finding their place in it themselves, rather than being told where to go and sit."



5. Veteran slide master Greg Leisz added his trademark graceful playing to the album, lending it a feeling of the American West in many places

PHOTO BY GARY MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

When working with really great musicians, it can be a pleasure to surrender control and just enjoy letting them react to the song instinctively.

"You're so right – that's part of it, part of the joy of it. I think these guys, they just take it for granted now that they'll be skating on their own for a bit, you know, and they'll just be finding out that they'll be listening to each other as well, as much as anything else. You have to be able to seamlessly fit in with all the existing textures and that takes a certain amount of time and experience and confidence in what it is that you're doing. If I change my part, you can be sure that the band will hear it and will mark that change and play according to it. But you probably won't even have a discussion about it with anybody.

"That's what musicians love more than anything else – when you're playing with someone who has heard what you've done, what you've changed, and has changed their path without mentioning it, just adapted to your change with no words, no words necessary. It's a wonderful gang to be part of and it makes all the other times worth it – because a lot of times you're just struggling. But when it comes clear like that, it's tremendous."

There's some beautiful acoustic parts on the album – and we couldn't help noticing that your lovely pre-war Martin D-18, which featured on the last album, *Down The Road Wherever*, wasn't up for sale at the recent Christie's auction of your guitars.

"Well noticed. That's a '35 D-18 that was given to me by a good friend. That guitar, the D-18, will have got on a lot of songs up to this point. But I found another little guitar that seems to have gotten onto a few songs on this album, taking that role, and it's a little mahogany parlour guitar made by Arthur Boswell. It just seems to have answered for some songs on this record and I don't know how many tracks it's actually on, but it's four or five. That's become the guitar of this album.

"The song *Tunnel 13* mentions redwood, but it's not actually a redwood-top guitar [being played], although Boswell makes beautiful redwood guitars – and, in fact, I've got one and they're lovely. But this one's a mahogany guitar and it seems to have spoken on a few songs quite nicely. Quite why that should be I've no idea. I'm looking forward to working with the redwood [guitars by Boswell] and seeing where that goes to – but until I sort of test them in the songs, I won't really know."

"I like to have a couple of guitars out of their cases and on stands, and that way they've got a fighting chance of getting played"

6. This detail of Mark's Duesenberg Gran Royale shows off its unusual retro-styled pickups – deceptively, one is a P-90 and the other a humbucker beneath the foil-like covers, selectable with a vintage-style four-way rotary switch

"The Duesenbergs are great guitars – I found they went straight on to records and I didn't expect them to sound as good as they did"

Mark's Duesenberg Gran Royale was delivered to him at a 2019 concert in Berlin at the Mercedes-Benz Arena. It was used on the new album

"That's part of the joy of it, welcoming people into your song and them finding their place in it"

This 2008 Mark Knopfler signature Stratocaster has been refitted with Callahan pickups and it features on the new album

When it comes to recording an album in the studio, the guitars that actually make it onto a record aren't always the ones you go into the studio meaning to use. Have you experienced that before – been surprised by how central an unexpected guitar became to the sound of an album?

"I certainly have – I remember the Grosh Electrojet doing that. With this album, it was the Duesenbergs. Because I bought two, I have a Caribou and a Gran Royale. They're great guitars, I've found that they just went straight onto records and I didn't expect them to sound as good as they did. But they're great instruments and I haven't even scratched the surface yet with those guitars."

You've spoken a fair bit about your motivation for auctioning much of your guitar collection at Christie's earlier this year. But what about the guitars you decided to keep? Why did you decide to hang on to some guitars in particular?

"Partly it's sentimental, but also I wanted to have enough left to record with, you know? Enough that I'd be happy to be recording with in years to come. So I need to have a few of those. Also, I've got a son who plays guitar – actually, both boys play guitar – and a daughter who plays guitar. So I wanted some stuff left for the kids to enjoy playing as well. Plus, you want to hang on to things that are family heirlooms, really. Like the National that Steve Phillips played – that was Steve's National and I treasure it and that was the *Romeo And Juliet* National... but it's the same thing for Strat Number One from *Sultans*, so I am careful about that.

"[Not auctioning guitars is] partly sentimental, but also I wanted to have enough left that I'd be happy to be recording with in years to come"

"There's things that you get really closely attached to. For example, I got to be good pals with Tony Joe White and ... he gave me his ES-330 that he used for *Rainy Night In Georgia* and *Groupie Girl* and all of those things. I said, 'You can't give me this thing...' but it was under his bed and covered in dust and the fingerboard was pitted so deeply from his sweaty gigs that it needed a new fingerboard anyway. So I got a new fingerboard for it and I use that 330 on every record that I make now; it's just become part of the scenery. So, again, some guitars are just that little bit special that they work their way in, you know? Or like the Martin D-18 I mentioned before, there will be guitars like that. You couldn't sell them and you wouldn't want to sell them because they'd be just too hard to say goodbye to."

7

7. Note the black pickup selector switch tip on Mark's signature model Strat

You recently made a special recording of the theme to the *Local Hero* movie, *Going Home*, which ended up featuring the better part of the world's top guitarists on it (see box over the page). It's such a memorable and timeless melody. Where do those powerfully emotive, Celtic-sounding lead lines come from, with you? They feel like a really important part of your musical DNA.

"A melody like that just resonates with childhood for me because of listening to Jimmy Shand and Scottish country dance music when I was small. I think that was among the earliest music I would have heard in Scotland. I'm more or less half-Scottish so it's in the genes already on my mother's side, who are just a family essentially of Scottish Geordies. There's a lot of links between the Geordies and the Scots; a lot of Scots moved down to Newcastle to work in the shipyards and in heavy industry. So when I'm writing in that vein, it doesn't seem like it's a foreign language to me at all. Sometimes [Scottish] musicians will say, 'Oh, that's very 'West Highlands', Mark,' or 'That's Strathspey that you're playing there, Mark...' And I'll say, 'That *what* that I'm playing?' So you live and learn. But anyway, I'm reasonably at home with [those musical traditions] and they don't seem like a foreign country to me."

8. The new charity single version of *Going Home (Theme From Local Hero)* features a who's who of great guitarists, with cover art by Sir Peter Blake

There are often distinct chapters in every person's life that can be quite different from each other. Musically speaking, do you feel that way about your own work over the years?

"No, I think the ditties [sic] are pretty much nursery rhymes and they haven't really changed musically. I haven't been too interested in improving that side of it. There was a spell a few years back when I was in New York a lot of the time and I was kind of interested in learning how to play a little better, just to learn a bit more about the music game. But generally speaking, it's the same old nursery rhyme and so, no,

"The 'Going Home' melody resonates for me because of listening to Jimmy Shand and Scottish country dance music when I was small"

I don't think so. But, lyrically, I'm still interested in trying to improve as a writer – I like the idea of writing a good song: the challenge being to do that and the other challenge being to make a good record of it. Gillian Welch once said to me that, 'All I'm trying to do is write a good song and make a good record of it,' and I thought to myself, 'Well, I've never heard a better explanation of the process,' and it's all that matters." G

One Deep River is set for release on 12 April on British Grove Records/EMI
www.markknopfler.com

9. Mark's iconic 1988 Pensa-Suhr MK1 went under the hammer at Christie's in late January where it fetched a remarkable sum of £504,000, with 25 per cent of the auction proceeds going to charity. Mark's remaining guitars will be used on future recordings or kept for posterity

PHOTO BY BEN STANSALL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

8

CALLING ALL THE HEROES

Mark Knopfler on recording a charity single that ended up with the bulk of the world's greatest players on it

While Mark Knopfler was busy making *One Deep River*, he also found time – along with partner in crime Guy Fletcher – to produce a remarkable recording in aid of the Teenage Cancer Trust charity. Taking his well-known theme music from the 1983 film *Local Hero* as its basis, over 60 of the world's greatest guitar players contributed parts to the single, including Eric Clapton, David Gilmour, Pete Townshend and Slash. Poignantly, it also features the last known studio guitar session by Jeff Beck. The project, which was released under the name Mark Knopfler's Guitar Heroes, made plenty of headlines when it finally came out in March, so we asked Mark for his behind-the-scenes account of how it all came together.

"I mean, the organisers knew more people than I do," Mark says with a smile. "I couldn't believe it. And yet it seemed that the more people the organisers suggested to me and Guy, the more people were getting on it. Poor Guy did great – I mean, he worked a lot harder than I did on this thing. We did have time to discuss the way something felt occasionally and where it might go, but a lot of the hands-on work had to go to Guy because he's got all the recording and engineering skills at his disposal. Thank goodness he does. Guy did a great job, really. Because [the list of contributing players] could have gone from here to Leeds," Mark chuckles, adding that the number of players who got involved meant that two separate edits had to be made for release.

"Cutting it down to two [versions] was the solution, really," Mark explains. "Just one for the radio – which would be desperately savage cutting – and the other one that lets the track stretch out a bit... I think it's about eight or nine minutes. But we used to make records that long anyway, in the old days [laughs], so it's fine. But I just really want to thank everybody for such fabulous input and such great session playing from beginning to end. Pete Townshend came in first and did what only Pete Townshend can do with a chord – or two or three. And then Eric Clapton came and played some lovely guitar and different licks. After that, it was David Gilmour... and people like Joe Bonamassa would just send stuff in from their studios. But it was all fantastic."

Of the process of making such disparate contributions hang together in something like a coherent, musical fashion, he says: "All you have to do is just try to treat it the way you would treat your own playing. And, I mean, it's your baby, you just want the best thing you can for it. Obviously, it's a little crowded down there in the vegetable market [sic], but I think Guy did a sterling job, considering, and I'm really pleased with the way it came out."

"You want to hang on to things that are family heirlooms. Like Steve Phillips' National. I treasure it – that was the 'Romeo And Juliet' National"

Mark with the 1937 National Style O resonator that is one of the guitars he'll never part with, as well as being a key part of his live and recording setup on an ongoing basis

VINCE GILL

In the midst of the Eagles' Long Goodbye tour, world-class guitarist and songwriter Vince Gill joins us to explain why "brevity and restraint" are all-important when playing for the song, how he was next in line for a reissue of Clapton's 'Beano' guitar after EC himself, and why vintage guitars will always have his heart

Words Andrew Daly **Photo** John Shearer

By Vince Gill's admission, most know him as the 'country-rock guy'. And in all fairness, that checks out given his resume, including Pure Prairie League and a decidedly country leaning solo career spanning over 20 records. When Gill joined the Eagles in 2017 in the wake of Glenn Frey's death, some were surprised that the SoCal classic rockers would choose such a Nashville-leaning player to take his place. But the move made sense if you think about it – especially considering the Eagles' own early 70s country roots. "I enjoy spontaneity," Gill tells *Guitarist*. "I love trying different things, and with this gig I knew it wouldn't be much of a guitar gig."

That's an odd take for a player known for plenty of guitar exploits, but there's a method to Gill's madness. "I'm fine with it," he says. "My favourite compliment came from Don Henley, who got a country rock guy in his band because I know how to be in a band. That's high praise. I know what's needed and don't waste time playing stuff that no-one wants to hear."

If the Eagles had gone with a younger gun, the inclination to overplay might have influenced the nuances within the band's iconic songs. But Gill, through years of experience, doesn't have that issue. "Man, I got a great lesson when I was a young whippersnapper when I played a solo on a record, and when I was done, the producer said, 'That was impressive. Now do it again.'" He explains: "I learned then and there only to do half of what I know. It was like a knife to the heart, but I got it. The real gift is playing what's appropriate, not always to chase the first instinct but to take it, edit it and refine it."

Time is ticking on the Eagles, as they're currently on their final tour, The Long Goodbye. They seem to be taking their time, and there's no end in sight just yet, but, regardless, Gill is prepared for whatever comes next. "There's a sense of mortality in music," he admits. "Great playing has a beginning, a middle and an end. I try to have my playing tell that story, just like any song. I think about all the elements; I intend always to serve the song, not myself. My favourite music is never distracting; the things you don't notice mean the most."

He adds: "People always ask me, 'Who is the greatest guitarist ever?' I always say, 'There's no such thing.' Why does anyone have to be the best? There's a bunch of good players; it's funny how guitar playing turns into a matter of outplaying each other. I don't want to show anyone up. I like things simple. That's how I live my life, that makes sense to me."

Vince Gill is a renowned country music songwriter and guitarist, with more than 20 Grammy Awards and 30 million album sales to his name

1. A keen collector of vintage gear – "Buy the right stuff to begin with," he says, and "you will never get hurt" – Vince remains faithful to his white Tele, which he bought for $50 in 1978

PHOTO BY JOHN SHEARER

You're currently out on the Eagles' The Long Goodbye tour, and by the looks of it, you're having a blast.

"It's pretty surreal, to be honest with you. Some nights, I look over to the side and see Joe Walsh while we're playing *Rocky Mountain Way*, and I'm transported back to being a kid in my bedroom trying to learn that song. I played it at every school dance and there's even tapes of me singing Eagles songs when I was a kid [laughs]. It's been pretty amazing to be a part of keeping the legacy of those songs going. You're right – it's a blast."

Joe is a hell of a player, but you are, too. After all these years, what keeps you inspired?

"It's interesting because as I've gotten older I spend more time thinking about what not to play. That's very different from when I was young and constantly thinking about playing as much as possible. My mindset is all about brevity and restraint now. That's what I love about the way Joe plays – he shows tremendous restraint. He could play more, but he doesn't. I really enjoy that.

"My inspiration comes from the little things I'm trying to do, like sounding better and choosing the right guitar for the songs. This is an interesting gig for me with the Eagles because I only play a little lead guitar; there are only two or three songs that I solo on, which is different from what I'm used to, where it's solos all night long. But I knew going in that they needed a rhythm player more than a free-wheeling lead. I'm more than happy to spend the night ripping powerchords for Joe."

"As I've gotten older I spend more time thinking about what not to play. That's very different from when I was young"

To your point, you're covering the parts of players who came before you *and* who wrote these songs. How do you manage that?

"The most important thing is that I *don't* put my spin on things. The beauty of what this band is, as it is today, is that we replicate those songs verbatim. It's been interesting to learn to play these songs the way they deserve to be played because they're not only iconic but also great songs. The solos and the background are memorable. As a listener, you want to hear whoever is up there play *Hotel California* the way it was recorded. Anything other than that would be a disservice to the songs."

Reviewing your playing history, restraint has always been integral to your style.

"Yeah, I think you're right there. The songwriter in me understands that side of it, you know? That part of this is powerful. The lesson I've learned over the years is how important songs are, and when you look at this catalogue of songs, it's crazy.

"Don Henley told me the first song he wrote for the Eagles was *Desperado*, and I said, 'Oh, come on, man! You started with the lame stuff!' He started laughing and said, 'No, that was the first one,' which, jokes aside, is a great example of the catalogue."

2. For the past few years, Little Walter Tube Amps – built by Phil Bradbury in North Carolina – have become a mainstay in Vince's backline: "They handle anything I throw at them. They're very musical sounding," he says

PHOTO BY JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

Is it easier to disassociate from a guitar perspective because you didn't write the songs?
"I don't take ownership of a single note within that music because I didn't create any of it. That would be foolish of me to do, though I do have enough respect for it that I really want to try to honour the songs and be respectful of what they are. Again, they're not just iconic; every part of those records, meaning the lyrics, backstory and everything else is so familiar. The Eagles, as a band, is the furthest you could get from a jam band, so it's important to do what's appropriate in the name of moving the song along and keeping everyone happy."

Joe is a laid-back, off-the-wall guy who doesn't plan much. You seem different, so what's the secret to locking in with him?
"The big thing with Joe is to follow him. I also need to trust him and know that, regardless of what happens, he's gonna show up. I play a lot of rhythm with the Eagles, and there's a lot of people who don't look at playing rhythm guitar as important. But, in many ways, I think it's even more important than playing lead."

And why is that?
"If you're playing rhythm the way I am, using it as a device to guide the song and inspire things... rhythmically, that in and of itself can make you play better but feel better, too. I've learned to apply the way I play rhythm guitar to my leads over the years. This seems obvious, but I want to make them more rhythmic. I love playing rhythm guitar, so I don't see it as secondary. Sure, it doesn't grab the same amount of attention as the lead stuff, but in a way, it's almost more important."

So, when you do take a solo, how do you approach it?
"I trade licks with Joe on *Funk 49*, which is amazing. That's enough for me, and my head would explode if I had to go back and forth with Joe on a song like *Hotel California* [laughs]. I try to show Joe I'm listening to him play by throwing back similar things. I'm not going note-for-note; it's more like a spiritual way. It's like, 'Yeah, I hear you. Check this out.' That's the essence of what makes call and response so much fun. Some guys just go off when it's their turn, and they have no clue about what's just been played. But when we do it, we listen, have a sense of humour and try to make each other smile with the things we're playing."

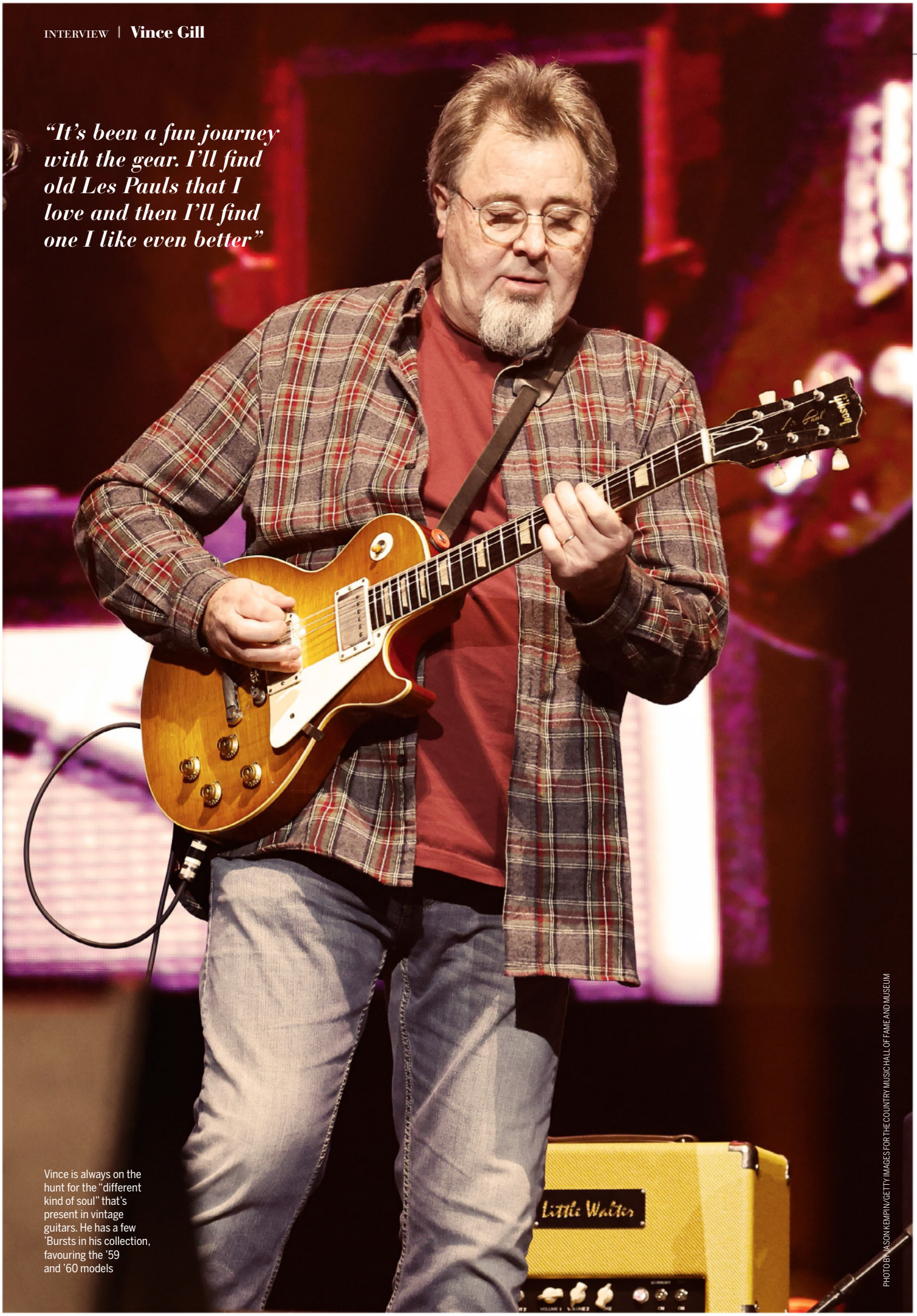
What gear are you relying on most these days?
"The big thing is for the last few years I've been using these great amps by Little Walter Tube Amps. I really like the way they build and design amps. There are a lot of great amps out there, but regardless of whether I'm playing the guitar with humbuckers or single coils – the Little Walter stuff handles anything I throw at them. They're very musical sounding, but I'm far from technical, so I couldn't begin to tell you why."

Do you get much into effects pedals?
"I don't get much into the minutiae of all that; I trust my ears. I use a handful of pedals, like overdrives and some compression. It's not a ton of stuff and, really, I mainly depend on my amp sounding good from the get-go before I go messing around with stompboxes.

"I keep it minimal and, aside from the overdrive and compression, I might do a little delay. The overdrive comes into play on, say, *Boys Of Summer* where I need a nice hi-fi sound to complement Joe, so I try to use pedals to do things like that. It's all about the right gear for the right song, rather than a one-size-fits-all mentality."

And you're a big user of vintage guitars, too.
"Man, vintage guitars have a soul to them. They've got a different kind of soul, which is different from new guitars. I've had a few 'Bursts, though I'm not bringing them out as much these days. The one nice Les Paul I am playing out now is a reissue of Eric Clapton's 1960 Gibson Les Paul Sunburst. It's the one they called the 'Beano' guitar – it's been on the cover of magazines, was on the album he did with John Mayall, and it's well known. Gibson was cool enough to reissue that guitar, and they gave me one when they did. Eric Clapton took the first of the reissues they made and they let me have number two."

Do you have any vintage guitars on the road with you?
"I've got an old custom-coloured Strat, which I believe is a '64 or '65. I've also got a Les Paul Junior that I use on three or four songs. People know me for my old white Tele, but I'm not using that all that much for this gig. It doesn't fit the songs; it's about the right guitar for the right song. I do have an old '60s Thinline Tele that I use for *Hotel California*, and I've got a couple of great old Martin acoustic guitars, too."



"It's been a fun journey with the gear. I'll find old Les Pauls that I love and then I'll find one I like even better"

Vince is always on the hunt for the "different kind of soul" that's present in vintage guitars. He has a few 'Bursts in his collection, favouring the '59 and '60 models

PHOTO BY JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE EAGLES

3. When he's on stage with the Eagles, Vince never forgets that it's his duty to honour the band's historic catalogue. "The beauty of what this band is today, is that we replicate those songs verbatim," he says. "Anything other than that would be a disservice to the songs"

What types of vintage guitars tend to catch your eye?
"Oh, man, all the shops know me and they sure do find me [laughs]. I'll get random emails from different shops, saying, 'Hey, I have this. It's the neck profile you like,' or whatever. I like the '59 and '60 'Bursts, but I'm always on the hunt. I love Gibson stuff, Martin acoustics, and even mandolins and banjos. I love the possibility of always being able to find a new instrument. Something about trying to do that moves and speaks to me."

Is there a guitar you let go of that you wish you hadn't?
"No, not really. I've never been much of a seller. I still have my first guitar from when I was 10, a '67 Gibson ES-335. That's not the most desirable year for 335s, but it was my first and I love it. And I've got my white Tele, which I bought in 1978 for 50 bucks. It's been my go-to guitar since and it's the one that's given me my definitive sound.

"I don't let guitars go often, but I'm also aware of reaching for guitars that are right for the space and sound. It's about creating the right frequency that is needed, so I don't let the special ones go. I've bought a lot of Tele's after that white one, but I've never found one like it."

What advice would you give to young players just getting into vintage gear?
"The best way to buy vintage gear that will hold value and appreciate is to buy the right things. People talk about the cost of vintage gear, but if you buy the right things, there's a better-than-average chance that it will be worth more than what you paid at some point. If you're gonna lay out a lot of money, it's best to try to not get hurt doing it.

"Gear is different from buying a new car, where it loses all its value after you roll off the lot. If you think of it that way, you'll go into buying and owning these great instruments – the best of the best – and you won't get hurt. I will always contend that, for me, at least, I can write these guitars off on my taxes as a business expense. They truly are that. Most of them will appreciate; I couldn't do anything smarter with my money."

Of course, you have to be able to lay out – or comfortable with laying out – that amount of money...
"The prices do sometimes make it very difficult, if not impossible, for a young musician to be able to acquire some of this stuff. I mean, when I was a young musician, I couldn't afford this stuff, even back in the day. When I was a kid, an old Blackguard Tele was 600 or 700 bucks – I didn't have that. But when I did, I spent it on an old guitar, meaning I found enough to buy one.

"Little by little, the prices have increased over the years, and my laying out of that money back then has been worth it. I don't know... it's been a fun journey with the gear. I'll find old Les Pauls that I love and then I'll find one I like even better. It's always like that. I guess it's pretty neat to work your way up the gear ladder, but if you buy the right stuff to begin with, you will never get hurt."

"Don Henley got a country rock guy in because I know how to be in a band, I know what's needed. That's high praise"

With the Eagles winding down, what's next for you?
"I'm always working on new music and another record. There's always some sort of song I've got going, and over the last few years I've written well over 100 songs. When things were shut down [during the pandemic] and no-one was doing anything, I found that to be a great time for creativity.

"Little by little, I've recorded a new batch of songs, so those will come. I love being creative – that will never change. So when the Eagles finally shut it down, I'll go back to singing my hillbilly songs and playing my white Tele. There's some kind of magic in that; I can attest to that." G

Eagles will play Manchester's Co-op Live from 31 May to 8 June. Vince's latest album, *Sweet Memories* with Paul Franklin, is available now on UMG Recordings, Inc
www.vincegill.com

PIONEERS

Johnny 'Guitar' Watson

From urban blues maverick to 'Superfly' funkster, the life, career and enduring influence of Johnny 'Guitar' Watson deserves a long-overdue reexamination. Watson's 40-plus-year career saw him negotiate his way through, arguably, the most explosive period in musical history and, unlike so many, he somehow managed to keep his ear to the ground and his music relevant to the times

Words Denny Ilett

John Watson Jr was born in Houston, Texas, on 3 February 1935. As a child he learned piano from his father, John Sr. However, like so many young black kids coming of age in the mid-to-late 1940s, it was the mighty T-Bone Walker, best known for his iconic composition *Stormy Monday*, that grabbed his ears and made him want to be a guitarist. T-Bone Walker's influence over the subsequent course that blues and rock 'n' roll took cannot be overestimated. A slew of great recordings from the late 40s found their way into the hearts of everyone from BB King to Chuck Berry to Jimi Hendrix – and young Watson was no exception.

Johnny acquired his first guitar courtesy of his grandfather, a preacher, who agreed to let Jr have one on the condition that he "never use it to play the Devil's music" – namely, the blues. After his parents' separation in 1950, Johnny moved with his mother to Los Angeles and quickly became a feature of the LA blues scene, clearly ignoring his grandfather's request!

By the age of 15 Watson was working regularly in the city's juke joints playing both guitar and piano. He also took time to check out the jazz clubs, too, and heard giants such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Later in life, Johnny mused that, at that time, jazz and blues were akin to two sides of the same coin. Musicians in those days embraced both equally and it was, effectively, recording studio contracts that determined whether an artist would grow to specialise in one or the other.

In 1952, aged just 17 and billed as 'Young John Watson', Johnny made his first recordings on piano for Federal Records. Songs such as *Pachuko Hop* and *Motor Head Baby* found Watson playing the typical driving R&B piano of the time. Within a few years, however, the piano would be replaced by the guitar as the main instrument driving the rhythm along – and Watson would be right there at the heart of it.

1954 saw the release of the movie *Johnny Guitar*, a Western that starred Joan Crawford. After seeing the film, the artist formerly known as Young John Watson became Johnny 'Guitar' Watson and, from that moment on, the guitar became Watson's main mode of expression.

Then, out of the blue, came a track that can only be described as out of this world. Johnny was still only 19 years old when he recorded *Space Guitar* in 1954. Even today, it sounds extraordinary with the guitar tone changing from bone dry to reverb laden on a lick to lick basis. Watson's playing on the track is biting and aggressive yet full of humour and surprise. There's even a swinging jazz chorus in there. *Space Guitar* really has to be heard to be believed. If one track could carve a path up to and beyond Hendrix, this is it.

Guitar First

The next few years had Johnny churning out a series of recordings built around his vocals and guitar. Although they're fairly standard fare for the time – a lot of slow 12/8 blues and shuffles with a horn section à la T-Bone Walker's output – it's the guitar that stands out, as though somehow dropped into the mix from the future.

Playing a Telecaster by now, Watson's approach and attack was ferocious for this pre-Jimi era. The licks he played are pure T-Bone Walker, often note-for-note,

ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS

Johnny's playing had a big influence on the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa and, later, Stevie Ray Vaughan

From the piano-playing 'Young John Watson' to an R&B guitar master (pictured in September 1966), Johnny 'Guitar' Watson devoted his life to music through the ebb and flow of his career

PHOTO BY CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES

with Walker's smooth tone, coaxed from a Gibson archtop, now replaced by a Tele and a cranked Fender amp.

Watson played without a pick, choosing a combination of thumb and forefinger instead. Listen carefully and you can hear the strings snapping against the neck as he plucked by pulling the string away from the fingerboard. There are no classical rest strokes here. It's said that Johnny would often have to change strings several times during a performance. Despite this seemingly brutal approach, however, there is a lot of subtlety at play in Watson's music. His use of microtonal string bends and across-the-beat phrasing are quite beautiful when set against the gnarly overdrive that he employed.

Despite his seemingly brutal picking approach, there is a lot of subtlety at play in Watson's music

Johnny always used a capo for key changes. He'd simply move it up or down the neck depending on what key the song was in and take it from there. Many might see this as a cop-out, but there is a method going on here. It meant he would always be able to exploit an open-string sound, a sound he wanted. He wasn't the only one to use this technique; both Albert Collins and Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown were also advocates of the capo.

Another Watson 'quirk' was to wear the guitar with the strap over the right shoulder. His hero T-Bone Walker did the same, as did Freddie King, Albert Collins and many others. Watching videos of Johnny in concert seems to answer why he did it. He'd often take a solo then put his guitar down for his vocal. With the guitar on the right shoulder he could put it down or pick it up much quicker than if he wore it the way most players do.

There was also a showmanship element to this posture. Johnny would take the guitar off mid-solo and wave it around while still playing. He'd rest it on the stage and continue playing, too. Think of Hendrix playing with his teeth, behind his back, between his legs and how he'd sometimes play one-handed. Brilliant and theatrical as it was, it wasn't original. Those tricks had been employed by most blues guitarists since at least the invention of the amplifier and, without doubt, Watson was a master showman, even claiming to have "started that shit" when asked to comment on Jimi's stagecraft.

Quiet Influence

Johnny's record label clearly tried everything to get a big hit out of him throughout the 50s yet few of his many records scraped into the Top 40 of the R&B charts at the time. The label had him record everything from pop ballads to jazz standards, many of them focusing more on his fine singing voice than his guitar. But despite this, his playing was being heard and he was having a big influence on the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa and, later, Stevie Ray Vaughan. Zappa cited the track *Three Hours Past Midnight* as the one that inspired him to pick up the guitar and repaid the debt many years later by inviting Watson to play on four albums between 1975 and 1985.

PHOTO BY ECHOES/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

The mid-70s was a turning point for Watson, with the release of *Ain't That A Bitch* finally breaking through

With this new-found fame, Johnny embraced the bling and perfected his razor-sharp public image

PHOTO BY WOLSCHINA/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

As times and tastes changed into the 1960s, it seemed like Johnny 'Guitar' Watson may have had his day. By now he was playing a Stratocaster and his self-titled 1963 album finds his guitar tone somewhat neutered. The album *I Cried For You*, also from 1963, finds him back on piano as he works his way through a set of jazz standards; the guitar was left at home for this session. It does, however, show that he was a well-rounded musician who knew his jazz harmony and was much more than the pentatonic bluesman that he's remembered for. Apart from a couple of other visits to the studio, though, that was pretty much it for Watson through the 60s. He returned to the clubs and picked up jobs where he could.

By the early 70s the blues boom that Watson had helped create was all but over. The Beatles were no more. Hendrix had tragically passed. Cream had gone their separate ways. So many bands that shaped the sound of the 60s on both sides of the Atlantic didn't survive into the 70s yet, somehow, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson, a comparative relic from the 50s, found a way to reinvent himself, finding a new sound and image that would serve him well for the rest of his life.

Five Essential Tracks

Aside from the aforementioned *Space Guitar*, *Three Hours Past Midnight* and *Gangster Of Love* check out these five examples that span Johnny's career.

HOT LITTLE MAMA: This track is as good as any of Watson's mid-50s recordings, demonstrating his driving blues licks borrowed from T-Bone Walker and updated.

I'M GONNA HIT THAT HIGHWAY: This great track demonstrates just what an influence Johnny would have on the likes of Jimi Hendrix.

MISS FRISCO (QUEEN OF THE DISCO): A fine example of how Johnny's blues guitar fits seamlessly against a funk/disco backdrop.

TELEPHONE BILL: A track that proves Watson was more than a bluesman. His solo here incorporates a lot of bebop/jazz language mixed in with his patent blues licks.

I WANT TO TA-TA YOU BABY: A fabulous jazzy blues from Watson's funk years featuring some gorgeous blues guitar full of rhythmic and dynamic subtlety.

PHOTO BY DAVID CORIO/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Johnny started out on a Gibson archtop, and while he'd play both Teles and Strats in the 50s and 60s, Gibson guitars – such as this ES-347 on stage in London in '87 – were back to the fore from the mid-70s onwards

Funky Time

In 1973 and approaching the age of 40, Watson released the album *Listen*. And he'd clearly been listening to what was going on. Funk and soul were evolving into what would become disco, and Johnny had the skills as a musician and producer to slot right into the centre of it. Movies such as *Superfly* and *Shaft* helped to popularise this new take on funk. It was smoother, jazzier and more cerebral than the purely dance music it had evolved from.

Johnny's guitar tone had cleaned up by now and he'd abandoned Fender for an array of Gibson models. From now until his death in 1996 he can be seen and heard with an SG, an ES-335, an ES-347 and an Explorer. His playing had matured, too. The core was still firmly rooted in the blues, albeit with a more measured approach. Now, Watson's new music allowed him to add some smooth octave runs and bebop licks into the mix along with some more complex harmony.

Johnny also self-produced his subsequent recorded output and often played many of the instruments himself, a feat which would be a huge inspiration for the likes of Prince and Lenny Kravitz. He had a knack for coming up with a killer riff that he would subsequently build a whole song around. Etta James, of *At Last!* fame, said that Watson was a "master musician who could write a beautiful melody or a nasty groove at the drop of a hat".

Two 1977 albums solidified his position as the "original gangster", a reference to LP *Gangster Of Love*

Still, a big hit eluded him. He again watched as others gained fame and fortune on the back of his inspiration. It wasn't until 1976 with the release of *Ain't That A Bitch* that he finally found success. The album went gold, selling over 500,000 copies as Johnny proceeded to deck himself out in broad-brimmed hats and sharp suits, all while sporting gold teeth.

Original Gangster

In 1977 two albums, *A Real Mother For Ya* and *Funk Beyond The Call Of Duty*, solidified Watson's position as the "original gangster", a reference to one of his most successful early records, *Gangster Of Love*. These albums are laden with tight funk grooves accentuated by brass stabs. The lyrics are light hearted and humorous at times. The melodies are infectious with everything underpinned with some beautifully phrased and understated blues guitar, proving the point that blues doesn't have to be loud to be deep.

Into the 80s and 90s Watson and his band toured extensively through the USA, Europe and Japan. Many concert videos exist and show a consummate professional at work with total command over his audience. You can see the fun that Johnny and his band have on stage yet none of it compromises just how good the band is, with Watson out front taking everyone to the church of funky blues that he'd, by now, patented.

It was while on tour in Japan that Johnny collapsed and died on stage from a heart attack. His music didn't die with him, though. He continues to influence guitar players to this day – without many of them knowing it. Watson certainly deserves his place alongside T-Bone Walker, BB King and Jimi Hendrix as a true electric blues guitar pioneer, but there is another part to the story as his music lives on through the likes of Ice Cube, Jay-Z and Mary J Blige who have all sampled his recordings for their own creations. This proves the point that Johnny 'Guitar' Watson was more than just a great and very important part of guitar history; he was, indeed, a master musician. G

Johnny's live music career spanned almost five decades, from 1950 aged 15, until his death in 1996 at 61 years old

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Golden Year

In its 50th anniversary year, British production guitar maker Gordon Smith is moving into a new workshop and expanding its already broad range with a brace of new designs

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

Laney

GORDON SMITH GRANDE & GEIST £1,999 EACH

CONTACT **Gordon Smith Guitars** PHONE **01933 391234** WEB **www.gordonsmithguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1 50 years? That can't be true.
It is. The original company was started by Gordon Whitham and John Smith in 1974. Gordon left early on (and created Gordy Guitars) and John and his wife, Linda, with the considerable help of Chris Smith (no relation) made around 13,000 guitars over four decades. They retired and sold the business to the Auden Musical Instrument Company in 2015.

2 That Grande looks new, but what about the Geist?
Style aside, both are new additions for this year, bringing the number of models currently offered by Gordon Smith up to a whopping 18. The Grande reflects some of the classy new designs we've seen over the past few years, while the Geist is an evolved version of GS's long-running Classic S.

3 Can you still custom order whatever you want?
Yes. Each model has an extensive drop-down options menu where you can plan your build and order directly. Or you can visit the actual factory or one of the numerous GS Hubs (see website) to try out stock builds and/or discuss a custom order. Easy!

For many years, Gordon-Smith (the original company used a hyphen) was almost the UK's best-kept guitar-making secret. The brand never advertised its wares or drove around in posh cars, preferring a small (very dusty!) workshop a couple of doors down from a laundrette in Partington, just outside Manchester. It might not sound very rock 'n' roll, but the almost-punk DIY ethos informed the guitars and many players picked up a GS-1 or Graduate because they couldn't get – or afford – a Gibson. And spending time with John, Linda and Chris was always a hugely enjoyable experience.

Today's hyphen-free company has, over the past nine years, brought Gordon Smith into the modern age, with the guitars now made in Higham Ferrers. As we discuss with owner and MD Doug Sparkes in the interview that follows this review, the brand is also just about to move into a new workshop down the road.

You could argue that a new chapter of Gordon Smith began with the Gatsby, a very stylish offset model that was launched in 2021. The next new model (or rather models) came with the Gibson Firebird-inspired Griffin and the reverse-style Griffin Flip. Our new, original-shaped

Grande model seems to take some design cues from that Gatsby. It's as if the more accented offset outline has been squashed a little. For instance, its waist and base are still offset but only lightly, and the bass-side horn is pulled in a little, though both horns are similar in style to the Gatsby. You get a whiff of Gretsch's downsized double-cut outline, and perhaps a nod to Reverend, but overall the Grande comes out very much as its own thing.

Unlike the Gatsby's Fender scale, the Grande is based around GS's version of the old Gibson scale length – measured by John Smith back in the day. But the small tortoiseshell pickguard is another more-classic reference.

This classic/modern theme continues to the glued-in mahogany neck with a very traditional plastic-capped heel where the top strap-button sits. The crown-shaped inlays look like they've come from an old archtop or the like, and the ebony 'board is fully bound like the headstock. This traditional craft, however, is peppered with modern style such as the spoke-wheel truss rod adjuster, not to mention the stainless-steel frets, the lozenge-like Gotoh 510 tuners and the rather neat, modern-looking bridge and tailpiece.

1. The bass-to-treble curving of the top and back means the edges are thin in depth – just enough room to mount the electro-acoustic-style output jack

2. The classic Gordon Smith three-a-side headstock nods to Gretsch and Gibson, of course. However, the company has always used a brass top nut, as pictured here

3. Although hidden by the blue metallic gloss finish, the Grande's neck is mahogany glued into the obeche body

You could argue that a new chapter of Gordon Smith began with stylish Gatsby offset model in 2021

first thing you notice is the light weight of 3.02kg (6.64lb) thanks to the obeche body: solid, not chambered. What is less obvious from a face-on view is the body shaping. Longitudinally, it has a flat top and back, but both are lightly curved across the body. It's not a new concept, but with the clean white binding around both top and back edges it creates a rather unique and really very graceful shape that's about 45mm thick in the body centre, slimming down to 32mm on the edge of that lower bout, while the

The control knobs, which pull up to voice the slug single-coil sounds, are slightly recessed into the top. A nice touch

The Grande has a rootsy jazz/blues voice that works effortlessly for classic rock and beyond

Grande Designs

Gordon Smith has long offered its Classic S and T versions of Fender's finest. The Geist takes the Classic S and gives it a posher super-S-style makeover: a pretty timeless design that's enjoying a healthy renaissance, not least among our Brit builders. Does the Geist bring anything new to the genre? Not really, but it is very well executed, has a good weight of 3.17kg (6.97lb) and, as you can see, it's not in the loftier price range of many USA builders making a similar style. We have a mainly obeche solid body (two piece, centre-joined) capped with a finely striped thin flame maple top that's dropped over the forearm contour, squashing a thin black poplar veneer between the two. The deep amber sunburst top is rather beautiful, too, the edge scraped cleanly to create the PRS-style faux binding.

That colour is perfectly matched by the quarter-sawn roasted maple neck and fingerboard, which uses a longer Fender-like scale length. The neck screws to the body on a nicely shaped, rounded nose heel and is peppered with simple black dots and stainless-steel frets, with that spoke-wheel truss rod adjuster located at the body end. There's some pretty deep flaming on its satin-smooth back, too. Like we said, a posher makeover – and with the headstock's dual tone relief, it's a class act.

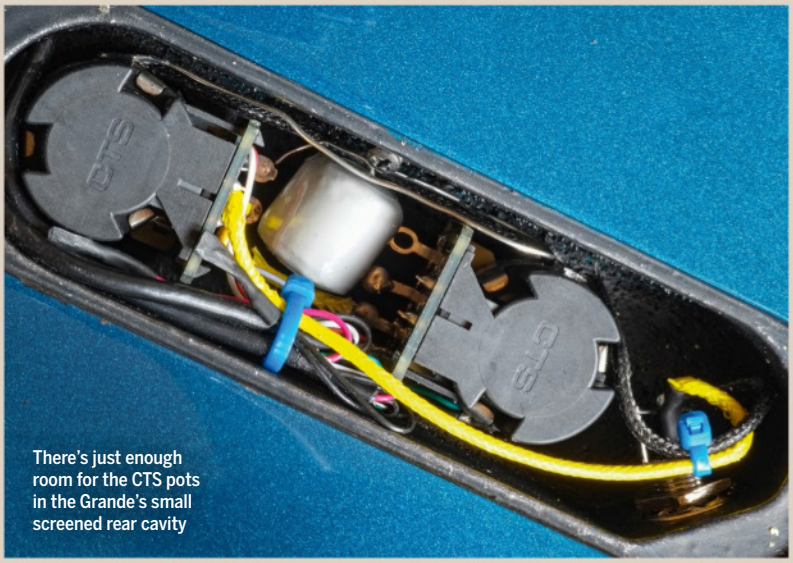
UNDER THE HOOD

Do the electric circuits here match the classic craft?

Unscrewing the Grande's recessed, foil-screened backplate there's just enough room and depth for a pair of the modern PCB CTS pull-switch pots with a nominal 500kohm value. The tone cap looks like one of those large paper-in-oil Hosco types, and although we can't see the value, it's .022µf, the same that's used on the Geist, which is easily visible in a much larger cavity. The Geist uses the same pots, but also has a 220pF (221 code) capacitor for its treble bleed on the volume control.

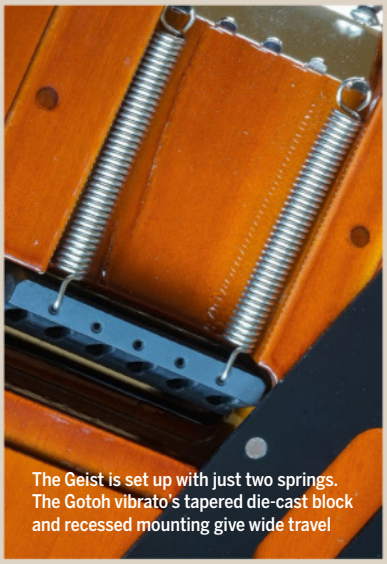
Another nice touch is the spring cover plate on the Geist, which is held in place with six small magnets (not screws), rather like Cream T's pickup-swapping backplate. As supplied, the Geist just has two springs. You need to pull that plate off to restring the guitar – much faster than screws. The Geist uses a chromed metal football plate for the output jack; the Grande, with its thinner-edged body, has the long barrel style that's more typically used for electro-acoustics.

The Grande's covered Partingtone humbuckers, named after GS's original location in Manchester, use 42 AWG plain enamel wire with an Alnico II magnet at the bridge and a V at the neck, with quoted DCRs of 7.8k (bridge) and 7k (neck). The Geist goes for a more modern style with the uncovered zebra coils, the bridge using 44 AWG, the neck 42 AWG and both use Alnico V magnets. Gordon Smith quotes DCRs of 15.5k (bridge) and 8.5k (neck).



There's just enough room for the CTS pots in the Grande's small screened rear cavity

The larger control cavity of the Geist also houses the CRL lever switch



The Geist is set up with just two springs. The Gotoh vibrato's tapered die-cast block and recessed mounting give wide travel

There's Gotoh hardware here, too: the rear-locking tuners and the industry standard two-post 510 vibrato that's lightly recessed into the top, giving it a low-profile feel and providing some up-bend. Like the Grande, the dual humbuckers – which are uncovered here and direct-mounted to the body – have simple switching and control, both with pull-switches to independently voice the single coil-splits.

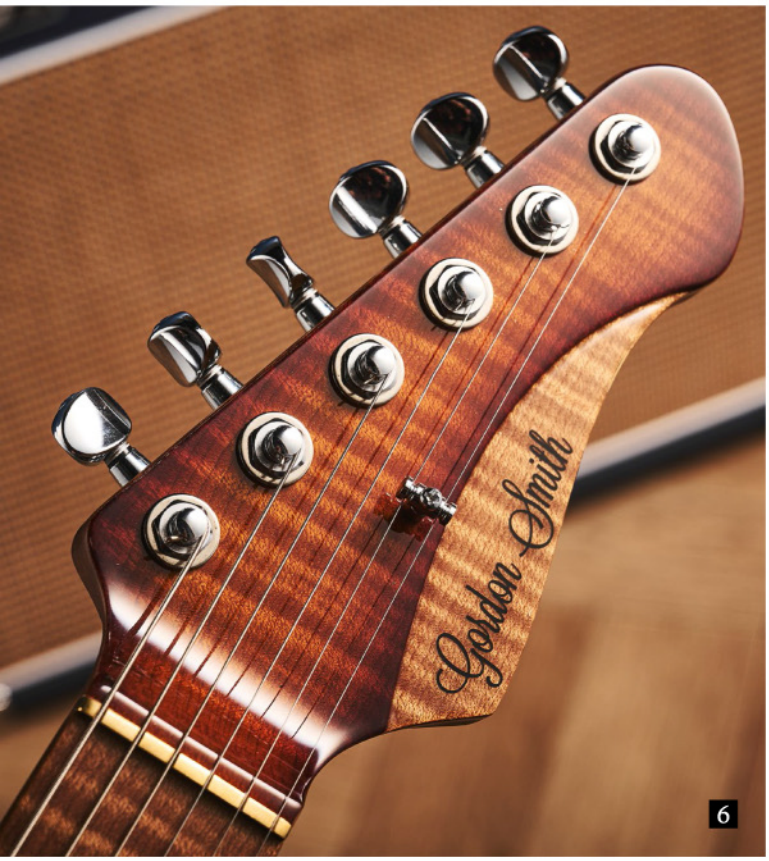
Feel & Sounds

When played seated, the Grande is extremely comfortable and balances well on a strap. And even though the rear strap button means the fingerboard leans a little away from you in playing position (as usual), it feels really good. There's nothing to adjust to with the Geist, of course, so Strat players will obviously feel very comfortable, especially with the good weight.

While we have different scale lengths, which certainly add their own feel, the actual necks are perhaps more similar than they feel. The Grande has a 20.9mm depth at the 1st fret, 23mm by the 12th, with a 43.4mm nut width and 36mm string spacing, growing to 52.5mm at the bridge. The profile feels like a pretty classic C that some makers might refer to as a '60s' style.

The Geist's satin-backed finish immediately gives a different feel and suggests a bigger neck somehow. It's actually very similar, slightly thinner in depth in the higher positions (22.3mm), and we have a compound radius to add to the subtle difference. For the record, while the nut widths are pretty close we get a slightly narrower string spacing of 35.5mm but wider at the bridge at 54mm. These seemingly microscopic details all add up, particularly when you throw in the overall

4. These Partingtone humbuckers on the Grande, like all GS pickups, are wound in-house. The hardware, meanwhile, is from Gotoh, a modern take on the classic tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece

5. On the Geist model, both zebra-coil uncovered humbuckers direct-mount to the body, while the industry standard two-post Gotoh vibrato is lightly recessed into the maple top

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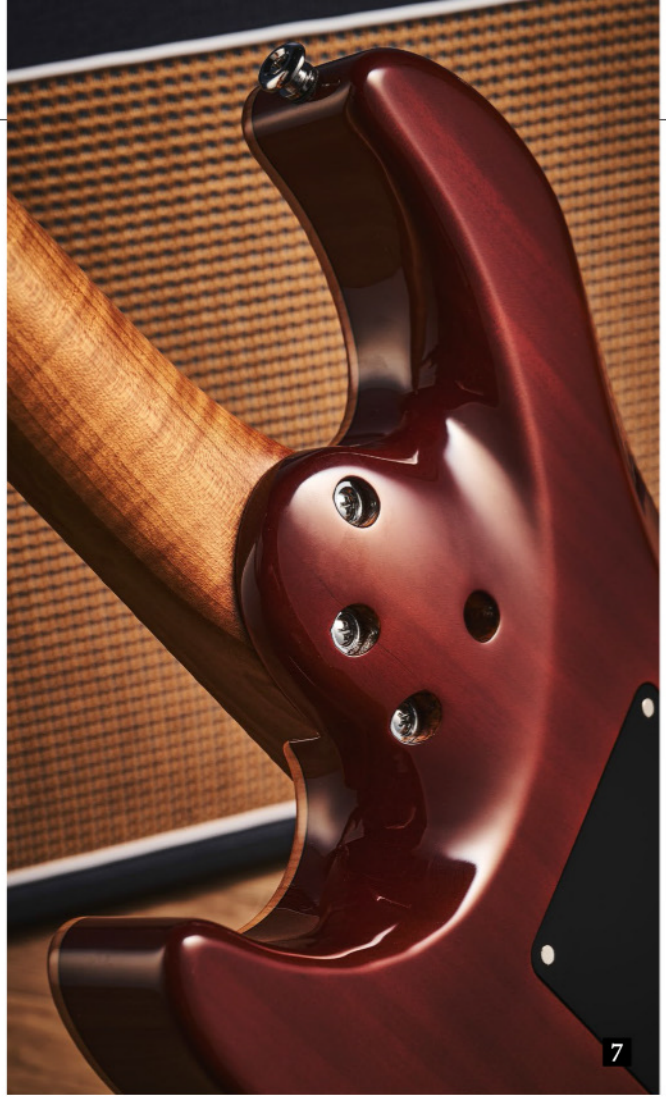
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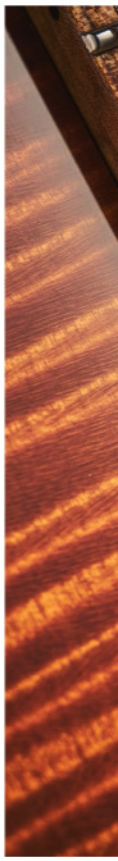

setup: the Grande is a very mainstream 1.52mm on both treble and bass sides; the Geist is fractionally lower, which might be too low for anyone without the lightest of touch. The fretwork on both is superb, the same medium jumbo stainless-steel stock with mirror-smooth finishing.

Rather like its appealing feel, the Grande's sounds match its comfort. There are no surprises, even though it does feel and, to a certain extent, sound like a semi-solid guitar – probably because of its light weight. The plummy neck voice balances clarity and depth with a full but not over-thick midrange, and on cleaner sounds it easily sits with jazzier and earthy blues styles. This is contrasted by the clean but well-balanced bridge voice that sounds slightly under-powered – but in a good way, producing a timeless jangly 60s-style voice that's clear but not over-sharp. As you'd expect, the coil-splits drop the output, but they're valid here if only for the mixes – as the pickups independently split, you can mix neck humbucker with bridge single coil, or vice versa, or have both split. And if you use the middle position a lot you'll appreciate the bounce and subtle tonal shifts. Listening to a Cream T Aurora with Whiskerbuckers, the Grande doesn't quite capture that vintage voicing, but the hint of semi character produces an equally valid sound. An engaging, very classic-sounding guitar that works for so many styles.

The Geist has a very different voicing with an undercurrent of Fender-like snap and percussion

Not surprisingly, the Geist has a very different voicing with a strong undercurrent of Fender-like snap and percussion that makes the neck humbucker sound almost single-coil like. There's no lack of clarity and the bridge pickup brings more heat and nose to the sound, more Duncan JB, and it splits rather well compared with the more thin-voiced neck split. The mixes obviously don't match a Strat, but they do give a strong third voice, which hints at an electro-acoustic with some volume reduction and loves some chorus and delay. It's like we've jumped back a few decades into the 80s, not least when you kick in the bridge with some gain for your scene-stealing whammy-bar solo.

Speaking of which, when it's paired with the locking tuners this well-proven vibrato is pretty stable, and the brass nut is nicely fettled on both guitars. That said, there's easy down-bend almost to slack here and the low E string falls out of its nut groove – which would probably be cured with a couple of extra winds around the string post.

THE RIVALS

While there is a dizzying number of makers in the UK, few have the wide range of models offered by Gordon Smith, not to mention the huge legacy or indeed the relatively low starting prices on models such as the GS1 (from £999), which put Gordon Smith on the map back in the day.

York-based PJD offers its Standard range using solid obeche bodies with proper bolt-on necks in thin satin nitro colours from £1,299. Cream T's new range – which is now made by the Auden Musical Instrument Company – is slowly expanding with new V2 versions of the Aurora (from £2,799) and the new super-S style Polaris (from £2,799), while the offset Crossfire will return this year, plus there's a new venture with USA-brand Newman Guitars to look out for. Haynes Guitars released its first models in 2023, including smartly crafted and designed models such as the Demeanour offset and super-S style Inflection (from approx. £2,600). As well as making superb Fender-inspired builds Atkin offers cool original and customisable designs like the Mindhorn and double-cut Boosh (from £3k), and from there we move up into guitar-making royalty including Seth Baccus and Patrick James Eggle.

Verdict

There's very little to fault or criticise in the Grande and Geist here, and these two diverse instruments illustrate the breadth of models available from the modern Gordon Smith company. As we discover in our chat with Doug Sparkes over the page, after pulling back its output during the Covid years, the company is back with a new workshop and all guns blazing – and, on paper at least, looks set to become the largest producer of electric instruments in the UK. While our review models are the 'launch edition' specifications, like all the other models they will become available to custom order.

Now, while the Geist can hardly be called a new design, it's well done and with that custom-order facility in mind you'd have a good choice, especially in the area of pickup configurations. It's also worth mentioning that Gordon Smith's in-house pickups have improved from the old days. As for the Grande, not only is this a smartly made model, it's got a lovely old-world charm about it. Its nicely rootsy jazz/blues voice works effortlessly for classic rock and beyond, although you could just as easily imagine it ordered with a vibrato and janglier pickups to drop it into the Gretsch-like world.

Overall, then, these guitars represent nice work, are well priced and fly the flag for the UK's world-class craft. Bring 'em on!

6. This dual-colour six-in-a-line headstock gives the Geist a classy look. The Gotoh tuners here are rear-locking and we get that brass nut again

7. The heavily shaped heel with its inset screws adds to the Geist's contemporary flavour

8. Both guitars use this spoke-wheel truss rod adjustment, which makes any necessary tweaks very quick and easy

GORDON SMITH GRANDE

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Obeche
NECK: Mahogany, GS Slim profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 625.5mm (24.625")
NUT/WIDTH: Brass/43.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, Grande Custom inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo stainless steel
HARDWARE: Gotoh 510 modern tune-o-matic-style bridge and tailpiece, Gotoh SGL510Z-L5 tuners – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x GS Partingtone humbuckers in chromed covers, 3-way toggle switch pickup selector, master volume and tone controls (both with pull switches for independent coil-split)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.02/6.64
OPTIONS: Only colour on this 'launch edition'
RANGE OPTIONS: The classic GS starts at £999; the more LP-style Graduate starts at £1,499 but with a large number of options
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price
FINISHES: Twilight (as reviewed), Merlot, Sovereign, Juniper – all gloss polyurethane

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Neat, classy design; excellent craft; light weight; classic pickup voicing; quality hardware

CONS We'd prefer a shoulder-placed upper strap button; it'd be nice to hear partial as opposed to full coil-splits

GORDON SMITH GEIST

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Obeche with flame maple top and black poplar accent pinstripe
NECK: 4A roasted flame maple, Modern GS Slim profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Brass/43.24mm
FINGERBOARD: 4A roasted flame maple, black dot inlays, 305-406mm (12-16") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo stainless steel
HARDWARE: Gotoh 510T-FE1 vibrato, Gotoh SG301-MGT tuners – chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: 2x GS Geist humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone controls (both with pull switches for independent coil-split)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.17/6.97
OPTIONS: Also available with shorter 610mm (24") scale length and 22 frets
RANGE OPTIONS: The Classic S starts at £1,099 but has a large list of options. Another bolt-on is the offset Gatsby from £1,299, now in Version II spec, also available to custom order
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, same price
FINISHES: Flare (as reviewed), Lava, Cobalt, Carbon – gloss polyurethane (body and headstock face), acrylic satin neck back

8/10

PROS Smart build with top-quality hardware, fast playability and more contemporary voicing; stainless-steel frets are superbly installed

CONS Not exactly a 'new' design; the circuit is a little basic for the style; partial splits would help with the single-coil sounds

Golden Age

Ahead of Gordon Smith's 50th anniversary later this year, we catch up with owner and MD, Doug Sparkes, to fill in the details about the latest chapter of the company's evolving story

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Gigi Gold & Paul Mockford

Only the second owner of this near 50-year-old guitar company, Doug Sparkes is planning to put Gordon Smith on the world stage

Plenty of very famous guitar brands have had plenty of different owners – their guitars quite possibly made on completely different continents to where they started. But not Gordon Smith. This writer can't quite remember when he first got his hands on one of these always affordable guitars, but it was some decades ago. In fact, the original brand founders made the guitars for the best part of four decades, and when husband-and-wife team, John and Linda Smith, deservedly took retirement, Gordon Smith was sold to only its second owner, the Auden Musical Instrument Company, a change that ushered in a new chapter under the direction of Doug Sparkes. "We moved production to Northamptonshire from Partington in Manchester in May 2015, so we're coming into nine years now," confirms Doug as we finally get to chat after what has been a very busy few months.

> "The Grande is part of developing original guitars: I want us to have our own identity"

"We have all the history books going back to the first Gordon Smith, number one," says Doug, "so we can map out all the key dates over the past 50 years." Over those five decades, every single year guitars have been made here in the UK under the Gordon Smith brand. And now it's time to navigate a workshop move.

"We're moving from our Higham Ferrers factory, just over a mile down the road," Doug continues. "It's a much bigger and more modern workshop with a lot of new equipment. That's being kitted out at the moment [February 2024] and in the next few weeks paint and build will move into the new premises and then probably a month after that all the woodwork will move into there as well. Our existing workshop is being converted to solely make the Auden acoustic range, for the first time from scratch in the UK. So we'll have

"Now, along with custom orders, there will be stock models available in retailers around the world"

1. The new Grande, like all the recent new-design models, starts life as a CAD programme

2. Gordon Smith always made its own pickups in-house and it still does: another unique aspect of the guitars

3. There might be plenty of modern machinery, but hand-work, such as fitting the neck of this Griffin, remains central

two factories – one electric, one acoustic – which are about a mile apart."

Potentially, that could mean Gordon Smith will be producing a sizable number of instruments, a lot more than at any other time in its history. "The new workshop could comfortably make 5,000 guitars a year, but I'm not for a minute suggesting that we'll do that, although I'd much rather have headroom that's there if we ever want to use it. I think next year we'll be making around 1,700 guitars, and I think we've got an order book in place now that'll see us sensibly through that.

"Up to now we've sold pretty much through a few retailers and direct in the UK, and anything else was direct to players around the world – other than Japan, which has always been quite a strong niche for Gordon Smith. But over the past few months I've been working on new distribution deals for Scandinavia and Germany and increasing our coverage in Japan. I've just done a distribution deal in Australia and we've just opened up our first retailers in the US. Of course, we've now got a hungry workshop to fill," laughs Doug.

"We've gone from a UK inward-looking business to one that's now looking out across the world"

4. Due to restrictions in the company's current workshop, Gordon Smith can't use nitrocellulose, but in the new facility it can. Watch this space!

5. A member of the team performs a final setup check on this custom-ordered Graduate before it's shipped to its new owner

"We've pretty much gone from a UK inward-looking business to one that's now looking out across the world. We're behaving more like a globally distributed business whereas in the past pretty much everything we've made has been a one-off bespoke guitar. We'll now be developing our stock lines as well as keeping the custom shop open, which will actually be separate areas in the new factory."

As Doug mentioned, Gordon Smith has primarily been a custom guitar builder. "Probably 85 to 90 per cent of what we've made were one-offs. I mean, you've called me and asked if I have got anything I can send you for review and I've replied, 'Sorry, no – everything we've made is sold!' But that's changing now. It was a process that really started with the Gatsby. We launched that as a range of guitars, rather than just a custom order from our configurator. So now, along with the custom-order configurator guitars there will be stock models, too, available in retailers around the world."

New Design

As we illustrate in our review, all these background changes haven't stopped Gordon Smith from working on new models. "It's really important," says Doug. "I mean, 50 years in and we're still a niche brand. We've got to get our guitars into the hands of more people. We sell a lot of guitars to people who already own, perhaps, three or four of our guitars, but equally important to me is, how do we bring the next generation of players into Gordon Smith?

"The Gatsby really has been a fantastic way of bringing new, younger players to the brand; I think the new Grande model that you're looking at will also appeal to that younger new audience. The ongoing challenge is to bring new players to Gordon Smith, rather than just selling guitars to the same old guys – who we love because they're great customers!"

So, how do you go about designing a guitar for a new audience? "I think one thing is 'small and light' because, firstly, the old guys don't want to lug around that 12lb boat anchor any more. And 'small and light' because younger players are pretty much all travelling around on scooters and the like; they haven't got a Transit van full of gear, they're carrying their gear on trains and the Tube, public transport, so small and light is one of the drivers. Obviously, it's got to look attractive, it's got to feel great, sound great and play great, and it's got to include the best components.

"We've spent so much time doing that, asking, is there a better component, a better way of doing something to consistently and continually improve the brand? I think if you compare Gordon Smith now with back in 2015 when we took it on, the guitars are built in a completely different way with a completely different philosophy behind the way we work, and [we're] not letting anything out that isn't to the level that we've set for ourselves.

"So the Grande is part of our aim to continue to develop original Gordon Smith guitars, rather than the more generic styles:

I want us to have our own identity. We're very lucky in that we have a very talented designer working in the business, Elliot Heggie. He designed the Gatsby and the Griffin, he's done the Grande now and there will be more later this year. My job really is to keep the reins on him! We've actually just done a second version of the Gatsby; he's such a creative talent.

"The Grande has been a year in development, probably longer, and I think there were four versions before it got to market. The previous prototypes have been out with players, we've shown them to dealers. If you saw the first prototype you'd say it was definitely the Grande, but it's about a lot of the small details: the placement of the output jack, those slight recesses where the control knobs go, finding a pull-push pot that fitted the relatively thin body depth. The pickups are bespoke-wound for the Grande, designed specifically for that guitar.

"At its launch it'll be offered in four colours, then it'll go up onto the GS configurator so anyone can specify exactly what they want. Except the brass nut, of course, which will be on every one! We still use the original GS height-adjustable brass

"The Gatsby has been a fantastic way of bringing new, younger players to the brand"

nut, too – though not on the Grande – and we still use John Smith's original machine that he made, which I think breaks every health and safety rule in the world! We have to clear the room when we get that machine working to cut the slots for the height-adjustment screws in the nut."

Conversely, the Geist is a less original design. What's the story there? "Yes, they are two completely different guitars and illustrate the breadth of what we do. I don't think we were asked to make a guitar like that for the first five years that we had the brand, but in the last year we seem to have been asked every month about that style. I think they're really back in fashion – the whole 80s thing is back in fashion!

"It's what I'd call a 'blank canvas' guitar and what we can bring is adaptability: you'll be able to order it with a choice of scale lengths, 22 or 24 frets, HSS, HH... So it's the opportunity for the player to get exactly the type of guitar they want, rather than having to compromise." A statement that perfectly sums up 50 years of Gordon Smith. Here's to many more!'

The offset Gatsby was a significant new design for Gordon Smith and has proved very successful, not least in bringing new players to the brand

Blackstar
Blackstar

Core Value

Blackstar introduces a timely update to its award-winning programmable guitar amp range, but how do these combos sound?

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

BLACKSTAR ID:CORE V4 STEREO 10, STEREO 20 & STEREO 40 COMBOS **£139, £179 & £215**

CONTACT **Blackstar Amplification Ltd** PHONE **01604 817817** WEB **www.blackstaramps.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **What have we got here, then?** The ID:Core V4 combos are the latest versions of Blackstar's award-winning programmable digital amp range, featuring the latest connectivity and a new low-power option.

2. **Do they actually sound any good?** They sound really good, with six programmable amp voices combined with improved delay, modulation and reverb effects, which can all be saved in six patches. The effects are all stereo and use a clever wide-field signal process to make the amp sound much bigger than it actually is.

3. **Who's gonna play one of these?** While the compact dimensions are ideal for home users, all three combos are a good fit for pro and semi-pro players looking for a small programmable amp that's ready to go in seconds. The stereo headphones/CabRig Light output can be hooked up to a console, while the updated USB-C connector offers four-channel direct recording to your computer.

Chaucer's famous quote 'time and tide wait for no man' could easily be expanded to include technology in today's fast-moving and constantly changing world. In the relatively small but significant market of guitar amplification, digital signal processing has made it possible to condense hardware analogue effects and amplifier voices into software, which can either be used in a computer as a standalone plug-in or loaded into a convenient digital amplifier platform. Digital signal processors continue to get faster and more powerful, while becoming increasingly affordable, making it possible to buy an all-in-one programmable amp for a fraction of what it might have cost four decades ago.

At the top end of the market, this translates into vast multi-core DSPs producing guitar tones that can go straight onto multi-platinum album tracks, providing professional artists with night-after-night reliability and consistency for touring, when you need to precisely reproduce specific tones and effects. Meanwhile, at the equally important entry level, users benefit from greatly improved tones and features that would have been out of reach just a few years ago.

It can't be easy for manufacturers to keep up with the ever-changing digital market, but one amp builder who has always stayed ahead of the curve is Blackstar, with a relentless R&D program that seems to result in more yearly product debuts than most of the competition. As if to underline that point, the Northampton-based company has just released the fourth version of its ID:Core programmable combo range, with small but significant tweaks that help to keep the ID:Core amps current in an increasingly competitive market. Time, then, to take a fresh look at the new ID:Core V4 Stereo 10, 20 and 40 combos and ask if improvements in digital guitar tone make these new amps more relevant for experienced pro and semi-pro players.

> The V4 combos are ideal first amps, and the sound quality means they're suited to all levels of players

At first glance, all three combos look very similar to their V3 equivalents, with smart vinyl-covered particle board cabinets and a check-patterned grille cloth. As the name points out, each amp is stereo and uses a pair of special-design loudspeakers: three-inch

1. The ID:Core Stereo amps all have the same six voices, a choice of two cleans, two crunches and two overdrives for a wide spectrum of tones that covers practically every musical genre

2. All three combos have been updated to the current USB-C connector for improved data transfer and compatibility – the direct recording feature in particular benefits from this. Each combo also now sports this low-power option, dropping the full output down to just one watt for quiet practice sessions

for the Stereo 10, five-inch for the Stereo 20, and 6.5-inch for the Stereo 40.

The control panel has a new brushed black aluminium finish that adds a touch of class. The mini USB 2.0 B socket has been updated to the current USB 3.0 C style, and there's a new power reduction button that drops the amp's full rated output to just one watt. Otherwise, the front-panel controls are pretty much identical. A single input jack feeds the six-way amp voice selector, offering a choice of Clean Warm, Clean Bright, Crunch, Super Crunch, OD1 and OD2, followed by rotary controls for Gain, Volume and EQ, which uses Blackstar's patented ISF control to blend UK and USA EQ circuits to taste.

Effects are handled by three button switches for delay, modulation and reverb, with a choice of four effects in each type governed by a split segment rotary selector that modifies one parameter, while a separate level control modifies another. A tap tempo button can be used to set delay times on the fly. There's an integral tuner, accessed by holding down the reverb button switch for a second.

Other connectivity includes sockets for line in and streaming using a TRRS jack and headphones/CabRig out with four-channel direct recording using USB. The two larger amps get a footswitch jack,

3. The ID:Core amps feature 12 different effects, split into three groups of four for delays, modulations and reverbs. Two parameters can be edited from the front panel, while there's more scope for editing from within Blackstar's Architect partner app

4. Invented and patented by Blackstar co-founder the late Bruce Keir, ISF stands for Infinite Shape Feature, which allows the EQ circuit to continuously morph between classic British and American EQ networks. It was originally designed to help speed up testing on a custom amp prototype by allowing the ideal filter crossover points to be discovered in real-time

In a studio setting, the CabRig Lite speaker-emulated output provides instantly great ready-to-record tones

in line with their increased performance capability. Power for all three of these amps comes via a 16-volt DC mains adaptor, which plugs into the rear of the cabinet, also home to a useful recessed handgrip for carrying. There's also an optional battery pack that gives around nine hours of unplugged playtime.

In Use & Sounds

The ID:Core's sounds have benefitted from software and hardware upgrades, improving the sound of the amp voices and effects, and in the Stereo 40 increasing the volume level a little as well. The six voices cover the entire spectrum from pristine cleans to OTT metal lead, and thanks to the deceptively simple ISF EQ control, they need minimal time to dial in. We used a couple of vintage and modern Strats alongside a PAF-equipped Les Paul, and for each guitar the experience is very much plug in and play, with instant gratification from the ID:Core's effects. The widescreen stereo effect seems more noticeable than before, with delays, modulations and reverbs combining to give the illusion that you're playing through a much larger rig.

The Clean Warm sound is ideal for jazz, while the Clean Bright voice has a more contemporary vibe and can be pushed into a mild overdrive with the gain level turned right up. This one sounds great with single coils and a dash of chorus and reverb. The two crunch sounds are ideal for chord riffing and blues-rock soloing – we had great fun using the higher gain Super Crunch voice with our Les Paul. Meanwhile, the traditional Blackstar OD1 and OD2 lead sounds will cover any need, from 80s master volume-type overdrive to modern metal chug-chug detuned riffing, although the small speakers mean bass response is somewhat limited. The slightly increased power of the Stereo 40 makes it more useful as a band practice tool, as well as making it suitable for smaller, quieter live performances.

You can hook the amp up to a console from the headphones lead and make full use of the CabRig Lite speaker emulation, although this disconnects the amp's internal speakers, so you'd need some kind of external monitoring.

Saving and storing patches is very easy: just press and hold the Manual button switch for two seconds. You can save one patch in each of the ID:Core's six voice switch settings, the only limitation being that the amp voice has to match the voice switch location, so you can't store a Super Crunch-based patch in the Clean Warm slot, for example. However, with Blackstar's Architect software hooked up via USB, you can save and recall any number of patches, as well as control the amp in real-time.

Verdict

On the face of it, the new improved ID:Core V4 amps aren't much different from the V3 versions, although the sounds are incrementally better, while the important change to USB-C keeps them compatible with modern mobile devices. The one-watt output power switch is useful for neighbour-friendly late-night entertainment, and the slight increase in output from the V40 adds to its versatility.

In a studio setting, the excellent CabRig Lite speaker-emulated output provides instantly great ready-to-record tones into your computer or console, making plug-ins unnecessary and saving your processing power for other things, with the ability to control all the effects and amp voices in real-time using the free Architect app. For pro and semi-pro players, this makes the ID:Core a powerful writing and recording tool, with the clever Randomiser feature producing unexpected amp and effects combinations when inspiration is needed.

The most inspiring feature of all, though, has to be the price – the Stereo 10 combo retails for just under £140, making it incredible value for money. The ID:Core V4 combos are obviously ideal first amps, loaded with features for hours of fun and inspiration, while the sound quality means they're suited to players at all levels. Definitely worth checking out!

BLACKSTAR STEREO 10 COMBO

PRICE: £139
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 5W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 3" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 340(w) x 185 (d) x 265mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.7/8
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: None
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Switchable output power from 10W to approx. 1W. CabRig Lite speaker emulation, live streaming, stereo headphones out, deep editing of amp and CabRig settings via free Architect app, integral tuner, 4-channel USB recording
OPTIONS: PB-1 battery bank (£69)
RANGE OPTIONS: Stereo 20 combo (£179), Stereo 40 combo (£215) as reviewed

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

BLACKSTAR STEREO 20 COMBO

PRICE: £179
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 10W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 5" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 375 (w) x 185 (d) x 292mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 5.2/11.5
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: Optional FS11 footswitch can be used to toggle effects and voices, or scroll up and down through patches
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: See Stereo 10 combo
OPTIONS: FS11 footswitch (£49), PB-1 battery bank (£69)
RANGE OPTIONS: As reviewed

8/10

BLACKSTAR STEREO 40 COMBO

PRICE: £215
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Programmable digital guitar amp
OUTPUT: 2x 20W RMS stereo
LOUDSPEAKERS: 2x 6.5" Blackstar special design
DIMENSIONS: 434 (w) x 185 (d) x 336mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 6.2/13.6
CABINET: Particle board
CHANNELS: 6x programmable voices.
CONTROLS: Voice select, gain, volume, EQ. Effect select, effect level. Button switches for manual mode/patch store, 1W/full power output, effects type select, tap tempo
FOOTSWITCH: Optional FS11 footswitch can be used to toggle effects and voices, or scroll up and down through patches
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: See Stereo 10 combo
OPTIONS: See Stereo 20 combo
RANGE OPTIONS: As reviewed

8/10

PROS New up-to-date connectivity; slightly better effects and amp voices than V3 amps; the one-watt low power setting is useful for quiet practice; competitive pricing is the main selling point for this trio – they're insanely affordable

CONS After three version updates, there's not much for Blackstar to improve on; we'd like to see more onboard patches with the flexibility of using the same amp voice in more than one onboard patch location; a retaining clip for the DC power cable wouldn't be a bad addition, either

Practice Makes Perfect

We round up six options for home, practice and live use

Words Nick Guppy

FENDER MUSTANG LT40S £205

The latest addition to Fender's popular Mustang range, the LT40S fires 40 watts into a pair of specially designed four-inch full-range loudspeakers. There are 20 amp types and 23 effects that cover everything from vintage Fender to modern high-gain tones. A cool colour display and an equally cool editing app make the Mustang great fun to use. There's no shortage of storage with 30 pre-loaded patches and another 30 user slots to store your favourite sounds in. The Mustang LT40S is value for money, too.
www.fender.com

POSITIVE GRID SPARK 40 £259

Positive Grid's Spark arrived on the scene to universal acclaim in 2019, largely thanks to its revolutionary jam-along app experience. There are just four programmable presets available here, but you have a choice of 33 amp models and 43 effects, so you're unlikely to run out of inspiration in the tone department. The Spark isn't lacking for power, either, as it boasts a powerful 40-watt power stage that feeds a pair of four-inch speakers in a bass reflex cabinet, which sounds a lot bigger than it actually is.
https://uk.positivegrid.com

VOX ADIO AIR GT £299

Vox's little desktop offering packs a surprising punch with a 50-watt amplifier powering a pair of three-inch speakers, 23 types of amp models and 19 effects (11 for FX1 and eight for FX2). The amp models are very realistic, including possibly the best clean and overdrive ODS models in any digital amp. The Adio features a surround sound setting, battery power and wireless for streaming and app control. Perhaps not the coolest-looking amp out there, but if you can get past that, the Adio's tones and features are great value.
www.voxamps.co.uk

YAMAHA THR10II £325

Yamaha can claim to have invented the 'third amp' desktop combo idea with the original THR. These models have been around for some time now and have been updated with improved software and a wireless option, as well as built-in rechargeable batteries. The retro-modern styling still looks cool to us and the sounds are as good as ever, with scope to cover any musical genre and a handy editing/librarian app. Other features include a tuner and extended stereo field technology.
https://uk.yamaha.com

PHOTO WWW.NUXAUDIO.COM

NUX MIGHTY SPACE £349

The Mighty Space is another battery-powered wireless desktop modelling amp with a host of features tucked in behind its cool-looking control panel. It has a 30-watt power stage driving a pair of four-inch coaxial drivers. The app is everything for the Mighty Space and lets you play drag and drop amp and effects chains with over 60 models to pick from, saving your favourite sounds in seven memory slots. Definitely worth a look at and positioned at a very competitive price.
www.nuxaudio.com

BOSS KATANA-AIR EX £544

Recently reviewed in these pages, the Katana-Air EX is a stereo combo producing 35 watts (dropping to 20 watts on batteries) into a pair of five-inch loudspeakers. It offers five different amp voices with a plethora of effects and EQ/mixing options via the Boss Tone Studio app. The Air EX's big selling point is its wireless capabilities; with a built-in wi-fi guitar transmitter, Bluetooth for streaming and effects pedal connection, and optional battery power, it's a truly cable-free solution.
www.boss.info

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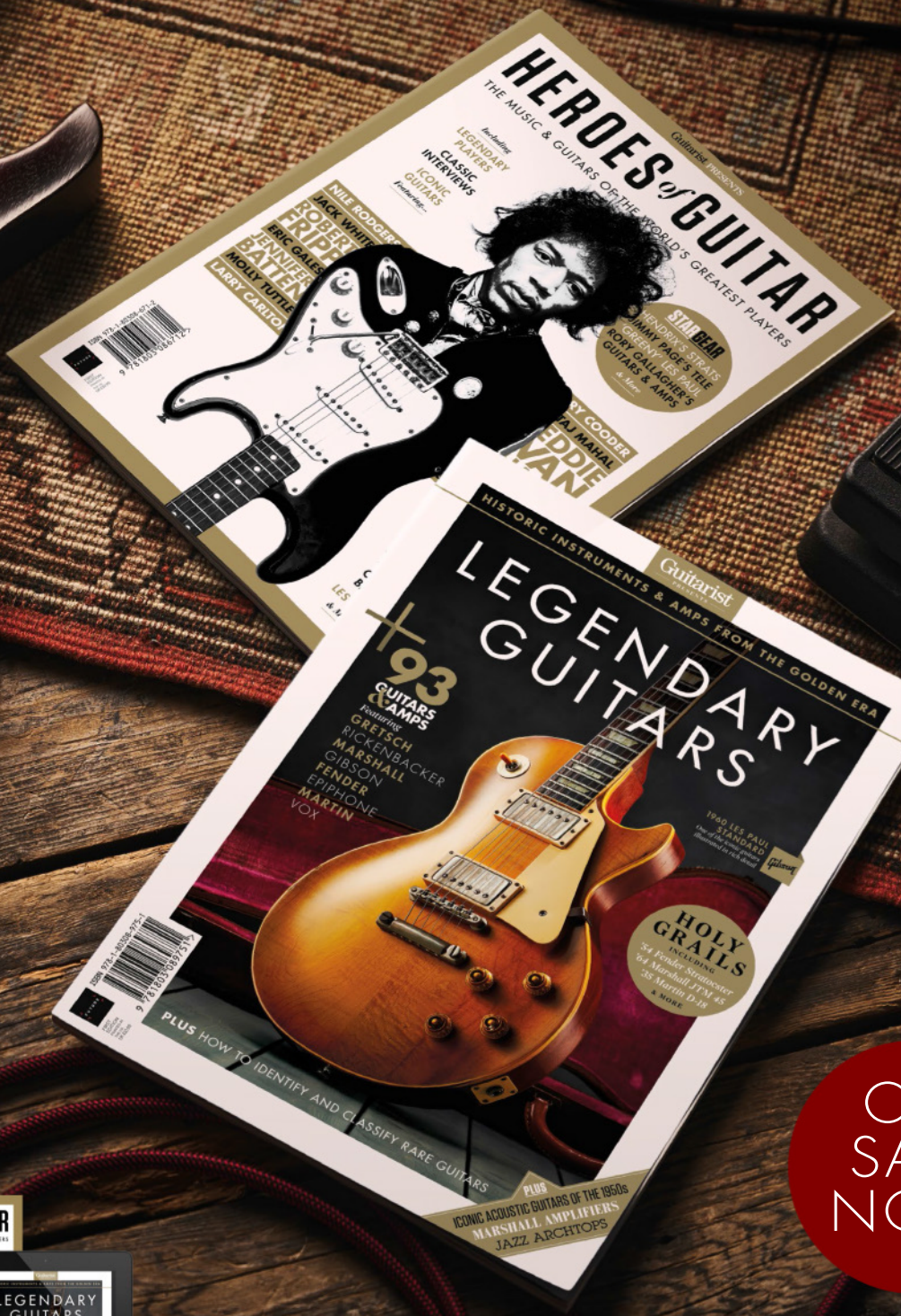

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Compact Companions

This new pair of Boss compacts – a booster and preamp, and an amp and cab emulator – could top and tail your pedalboard

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

BOSS BP-1W BOOSTER/PREAMP & IR-2 AMP & CABINET £259 & £179

CONTACT **Roland UK** WEB **www.boss.info**

What You Need To Know

1. **We haven't seen a new Boss compact here for a while...** And then, like buses, two come at once! These were both released in late 2023.

2. **One looks more complicated than the other.** That's right, the Waza Craft BP-1W is a pretty straightforward booster and preamp pedal, while the IR-2 is an amp and cabinet emulator that, by necessity, has plenty of knobs and eight sockets compared with the other pedal's two!

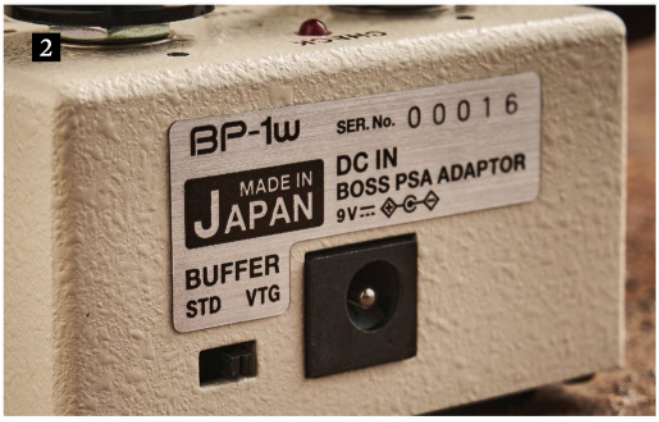
3. **Would they both go on my pedalboard, though?** The BP-1, for sure, and the IR-2, possibly – it has many roles, but it could be the last link on your 'board if you want to go straight into a PA, rather than use an amp.

Here's a pair of Boss compact pedals, which are designed for completely different roles, that could complement each other in a signal chain. The Waza Craft BP-1W boost pedal takes the preamps found in some vintage Boss and Roland gear – the CE-1 Chorus Ensemble and RE-201 Space Echo – and puts them together in one pedal (along with a natural straight boost) that's designed to give your amp a kick or generally enhance the sound of your signal chain. The other pedal on review here is the IR-2, which takes the amp and speaker emulation facility of Boss's twin-footswitch IR-200 and makes it available in this compact pedal format.

Boss Boosts

The CE-1 Chorus Ensemble and the RE-201 Space Echo may be long-gone 1970s designs, but they live on – and perhaps not in their original, intended roles. While the CE-1 provided luxurious chorus and vibrato and the RE-201 offered mellifluous tape echoes, those effects were coloured and enhanced by the sound of the preamps in each unit, something that guitarists found that they favoured, at times using the units with the effects bypassed just for the extra that the preamp offered. Here, the new BP-1W uses analogue circuitry to recreate the sound of those two preamps, delivering them via Level and Gain knobs. You choose your preamp from a three-way toggle switch, and the central (NAT) position offers a natural transparent sound if you prefer to dial in a boost without the added colour. You also get the choice of two buffers: Standard and the slightly warmer-toned Vintage.

The Level knob dials up the output volume with plenty of capacity for substantial boost, while a Gain knob adds in some dirt – and between the two of them you can set up your favoured tone, mixing a sufficient amount of volume with a dash of grit. When the Gain knob is maxed, it can actually add in quite an amount of drive/distortion, but that varies and is dependent on which of the three settings you're using, with the CE setting getting the most distorted. That crunch is there to be called upon, but we preferred the sweet spots



1. On the BP-1W you can choose your tonal flavour from the toggle switch: CE-1, Natural or RE-201

2. Using the Buffer switch, you can select between the standard pure buffer or a vintage-style buffer, designed, says Boss, for "the uniquely sweet sound of a vintage preamp"

THE RIVALS

Another pedal based on a Boss preamp is JHS's The Clover (£187). Taking the FA-1 preamp as inspiration, it has Volume, Bass, Middle and Treble knobs, plus a three-way toggle switch for cutting the EQ out completely, no Mids, or full EQ. Elsewhere, the Xotic EP Booster (£129) is a perennial choice that's based on the preamp section of the Echoplex EP-3.

For compact amp simulation pedals try the Strymon Iridium (£379), Walrus Audio ACS1 Amp + Cab Simulator (£399) or the UAFX range, with each pedal emulating a specific amp type: Woodrow '55 Instrument Amplifier (£349) and Dream '65 Reverb Amplifier (£349) for Fenders, Ruby '63 Top Boost Amplifier (£349) for Vox, and Lion '68 Super Lead Amp (£379) for Marshall.

3. Going beyond the capability of your average Boss compact pedal, on the IR-2 you can use the USB socket to load in new IRs or connect to a DAW for recording. Monitor that using the headphone socket or use it with just guitar and pedal for some silent practice

to be found further back on the dial. The RE and CE settings both add in a little extra midrange compared with the NAT sound, just right for adding a little girth. However, both have their own character, the RE being softer/warmer in the top-end with more subdued transients to the CE's glassier top and clarity in pick attack. All three voices work brilliantly, providing plenty to give your amp a kick, bolster the sound of other dirt pedals or just generally providing that 'more' factor.

Rig In A Box

Plenty of players have got used to working without amps these days, with the consistent quality of sound and sheer convenience of digital winning out in many situations. If we're talking convenience, few modellers come close to the practicality of this new IR-2 – the amount of functionality Boss has packed into a Compact series pedal is just staggering.

What you're getting here is a pedal that can supply the signature sound of 11 different amp types – a mix of some named favourites and some more generic Boss creations – each of which with an associated cab IR from Celestion Digital, although you can load alternative IRs into the pedal using the free, dedicated IR-2 IR Loader app for Mac OS and Windows. Each amp can be adjusted with Level, Gain, Middle, Treble and Bass knobs, and an ambience knob adds in a choice of either Room, Hall or Plate Reverb. Connection is via a mono input with a choice of mono or stereo output, and there's also a mono or stereo send and return loop so that you can bring other pedals into the signal path after the amp emulation.

While the default option is connection to a line-level device, there is a range of options for calibrating the IR-2 for

4. Presses on this footswitch toggle between the two amp channels, Green and Red, with the LED lighting up accordingly. A long press is needed to bypass the pedal

5. The IR-2's mode control lets you select from the 11 different onboard amp emulations and their associated cab

6. Dual concentric knobs have the Ambience, Level and Gain as the easily grabbable parameters, with Bass, Middle and Treble on the outer rings, which are a little more fiddly in use

optimum use with different amps. For a bit of silent practice, there's also a mini-jack stereo headphone socket. Besides loading IRs, a USB input allows the pedal to function as an audio interface so you can easily connect to a DAW for recording.

The amps are tactile to play through, nicely dynamic and react well to boost pedals placed in front, making a combination of IR-2 and BP-1W a practical proposition. The 11 amps have been chosen to cover a range of musical genres, and the named models (Fender Twin and Bassman, Vox AC-30, Marshall 'Plexi', Soldano SLO-100 and Mesa/Boogie Rectifier) would probably be enough for many players. However, there are also some really good tones delivered by the proprietary models as Boss uses its Multi-Dimensional Processing (MDP) to positive effect for crunch and high-gain sounds that retain great string clarity. These models are useful for live scenarios because you get instant access to two channels, each with a different amp or the same amp with altered settings (perhaps more gain), which are toggled between with the footswitch (a press and hold is needed for bypass). There's also a provision to add an external footswitch for the channel switching.

The go-anywhere IR-2 might just be the most practical possible addition to your gear setup

If you don't want amp and cab together then you're able to turn the other on or off. For example, you may wish to turn the cab off so you can use an amp's sound as a drive pedal in front of your amp, or perhaps use the Celestion IRs to complement another favoured amp-in-a-box pedal.

Verdict

The BP-1W is a quality tone conditioner to have in front of your amp, while the IR-2 might just be the most practical possible addition to your gear setup. The fact that it has so many uses and is a go-anywhere pedal that will run from battery power makes it a versatile problem solver that could be the perfect choice to sling into a spare gigbag pocket or have on your pedalboard ready to be brought into action when the need arises. Couple it with the BP-1W to add switchable gain-changing options and you've got a truly portable rig that'll get you through many scenarios. G

BOSS BP-1W

PRICE: £259
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Boost pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
MODES: RE-201, Natural, CE-1
CONTROLS: Level, Gain, Natural/RE/CE switch, Buffer switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 60 mA
DIMENSIONS: 73 (w) x 129 (d) x 59mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

BOSS IR-2

PRICE: £179
ORIGIN: Malaysia
TYPE: Amp & cabinet simulation pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
MODES: Clean, Twin, Tweed, Diamond, Crunch, Brit, Hi-Gain, Soldano, Brown, Modded, Rectifier
CONTROLS: Ambience, Level, Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble, Mode selector, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard outputs (A/Mono, B), standard CH Select input, standard Send, standard, Return, Phones, USB
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor 160 mA
DIMENSIONS: 73 (w) x 129 (d) x 59mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Compact size; battery power for portability; BP-1W revives classic Boss preamp sounds; IR-2 is a full rig in a small box; headphone socket; S/R loop; USB audio interface capability

CONS The IR-2's dual-concentric knobs can be a bit fiddly to operate

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« BLUEPRINT »

IT'S ONLY ROCK 'N' ROLL

Used decades apart by Keith Richards and Billy F Gibbons, Newman guitars have a unique place in rock history. And thanks to a new enterprise, they're now being made in the UK. Are you sitting comfortably?

Words Dave Burrluck **Studio photography** Phil Barker

Not too many small, independent guitar-makers can list The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty and Mike Campbell, not to mention James Honeyman-Scott and Joe Ely, as owners and players of their guitars. There are plenty more, too, and that includes a relatively recent convert in Billy F Gibbons. The brand in question is Newman Guitars whose roots take us back to the glory days and Ted Newman Jones III.

From the off, the story of Ted Newman Jones III, or just plain 'Newman', is a little hard to definitively pin down. He was born in Dyersburg, Tennessee, in 1949, and caught the rock 'n' roll bug in his teens, though he found that he was better at fixing up guitars and selling them on than he was at playing them. Some sources credit Ted with bolting together 'Blackie' for Eric Clapton, but that's not the story EC tells. What seems more likely is that Newman – who had a bit of a thing for The Rolling Stones – met the band when he was invited to a show on their 1969 US tour by author Stanley Booth who was on the road researching his must-read book, *The True Adventures Of The Rolling Stones*. Noë Goldwasser, writing for *Guitar World* in 1981, suggested Ted was at the fabled Altamont Speedway gig on 6 December 1969, "tossing perfectly tuned guitars to his man".

Ted Newman circa 1980 with his modern six-string design. Its 'Woody Woodpecker' fingerboard inlays were designed for Ronnie Wood

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF SMITH / NEWMAN GUITARS

What definitely did happen is that Ted decided to make his way to the south of France, ultimately to the Nellcôte mansion just outside Villefranche-sur-Mer in the summer of 1971 where the tax-exile Stones were recording *Exile On Main Street*. He specifically wanted to show Keith Richards a Rickenbacker he'd modded that he'd tuned to open E. Apparently, Keith pulled off the low E string, tuned the guitar to open G and said, "That's how you do it!"

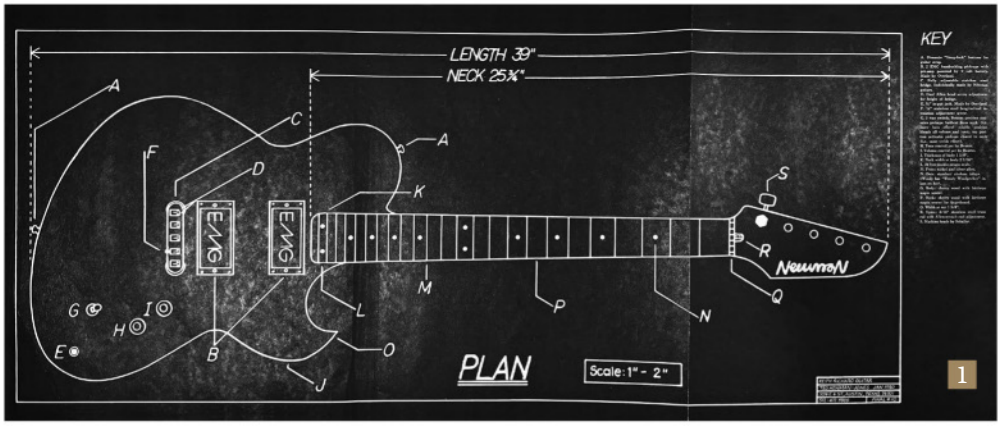
Not wanting to overstay his welcome, Ted returned to the USA, possibly via Spain, where he wanted to learn some tips from the guitar makers there. Keith later called Ted after the famous Nellcôte break-in to ask for his help in replacing his lost pieces and, after The Stones decamped to Los Angeles on 29 November to finish and mix the album, Ted temporarily moved in with Keith, set up a bench and helped him sort things out. Keith, meanwhile, headed off to Switzerland on 26 March 1972 to pursue a 'cure' from his drug addiction. In May, rehearsals started in Montreux for The Stones' June USA tour.

At some point in early 1972, then, Ted got a call from Keith asking if he wanted to go on the forthcoming tour. It seems there was no specific job in mind, but Bill Wyman places Ted as "guitar tuner" in a list of that tour's entourage.

During the various times Ted spent with Keith, they discussed creating a five-string electric guitar for open G tuning – Keith was, of course, taking the low string off his Teles – with an idea for the body shape that combined two ellipses. Presumably after that tour had finished on 26 July at Madison Square Garden, Ted got to work. The resulting guitar is very distinctive and was first used live by Keith on 18 January 1973 in Los Angeles, for a well-publicised Nicaragua Benefit concert.

On the 11-date Pacific Tour that followed in January and February 1973, Keith used

One of two UK-built Newman prototype five-strings that were built in February 2024 to the CAD drawings signed off by Ted before he passed away in 2016



BLUEPRINT IMAGE COURTESY OF JEFF SMITH / NEWMAN GUITARS

1. The blueprint of the modern Newman design from the early 80s

2. Keith Richards with version two of the original Newman five-string in Rotterdam, October 1973

3. The UK-made models will feature this unique five-string through-strung bridge designed by Jeff Smith at Newman HQ

4. The prototype 'skeleton' sounds superb and uses a pair of Cream T Banger & Mash humbuckers, originally designed for Keef

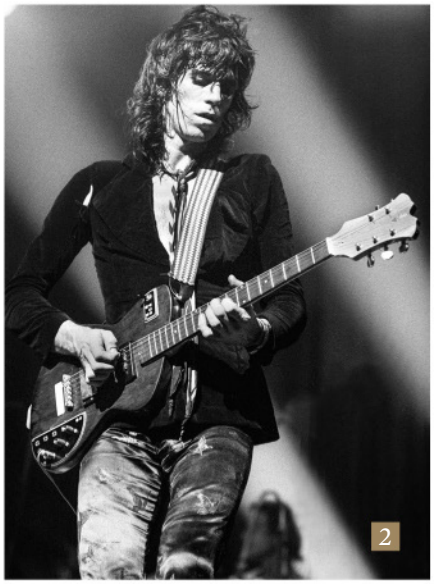


PHOTO BY GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

the Newman five-string again. "Keith Richards changed his axe after every number," noted a journalist from *Music Maker*, "but as far as I could hear, it didn't help his playing." By our reckoning, it remains the first electric five-string electric guitar and was put to good use until Ronnie Wood gifted Keith an electric five-string guitar made by his luthier-of-choice, Tony Zemaitis.

Presumably, when he was off tour Ted was developing his craft and the guitar we know as the 'modern' Newman shape evolved from that first non-cutaway five-string to a not dissimilar outline but with quite a squat, sharp-pointed cutaway (Keith is pictured with this in an early Mesa/Boogie catalogue).

Start Me Up

Ted Newman stayed with Keith until around 1977 or '78. Writing for *Vintage Guitar* magazine, Doug Yellow Bird states: "Danny McCulloch, a close friend of Ted, recalls the birth of Newman Guitars like this: 'In 1977, Keith Richards gave us $20,000 to set up shop in Austin, Texas. Ted and I set up in a big warehouse on 4th Street in downtown Austin. Soon after, Ted and I hired Bob Harris and Joel Judlin to help. We flew to Memphis the summer of 1978 to catch The Stones' *Some Girls* tour, and one evening we went downtown with the band and had BBQ spaghetti. That was when I recall Bill Wyman pointed out to Ted that the word 'Newman' could be an ambigram if you messed with the 'e' and the 'a'.'"

> The distinctive five-string guitar was first used live by Keith Richards on 18 January 1973 in LA

The Austin period proved quite successful, with the fledgling Newman guitar company making instruments for plenty of local players and international rockstars. The 'modern' Newman shape was documented as a fold-out blueprint in *The Rolling Stones: The First Twenty Years* by David Dalton, originally published in 1981, which also includes a lengthy interview with Ted. That blueprint of Newman's five-string design is dated January 1980 and named the 'Keith Richard [sic] Guitar'. It's this style that Keith is seen playing while moonlighting from The Rolling Stones with Ronnie Wood and The New Barbarians' tour of 1979.

Meanwhile, the reputation of Ted Newman was spreading. Archetypal guitar hero The Pretenders' James Honeyman-Scott owned at least one, and when asked by journalist Jas Obrecht in 1981 if he cared for his guitars himself, he replied, "No, I have a guy that looks after them for me. On the next American tour I'm taking Ted Newman Jones, who works for Keith Richards. He wants to come with me. He builds beautiful guitars, fantastic guitars. He made some five-strings for Keith. He's great."

Ted had a brush with the mainstream when American-brand Chandler produced the offshore-made Austin Special in the early 90s. The project apparently stalled over a disagreement, but it served to keep Ted's story alive. As Joe Gore wrote in *Premier Guitar*: "He subsequently hit hard times, including a prison stint and poor health, and passed away in 2016." But that's not the end of the story; it's the start of another...

"We achieved what Ted Newman Jones III's vision really was within his lifetime and to his approval" ***Jeff Smith***

5. The prototype's simple controls leave plenty of potential for coil-splits, and even pickup swapping, on the production models

6. The lightly back-angled headstock features a branded ambigram logo, created by Ted

7. Deep-set screws in washers hold the maple neck to the obeche body

8. Of the two neck widths on the current prototypes, this is the narrower, more unusual option

Not Fade Away

The current CEO of Newman Guitars, Jeff Smith, describes how he got involved. "After much discussion with Ted about rebuilding the company, I drove to Dyersburg, Tennessee, in late March of 2015. Ted was diagnosed with lung cancer later that year, which changed the plan from building guitars together to preserving his vision. The new goal was learning everything Ted knew and digitally storing it in a CAD file in order to build a guitar for his approval within his lifetime. Ted approved the last prototype just two weeks before he passed away on 1 July 2016."

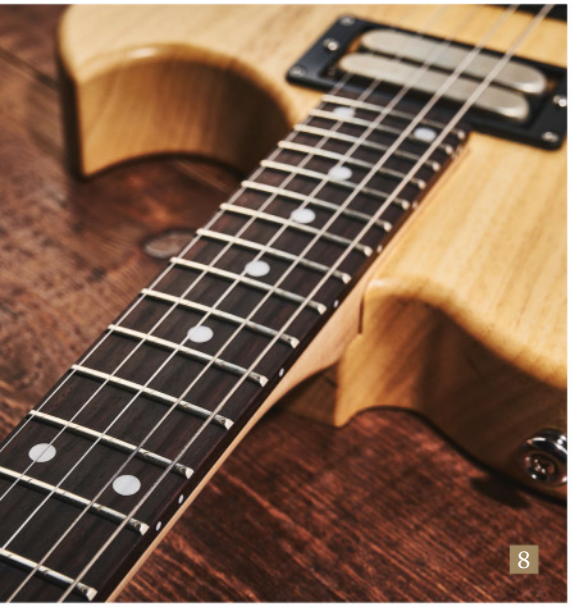
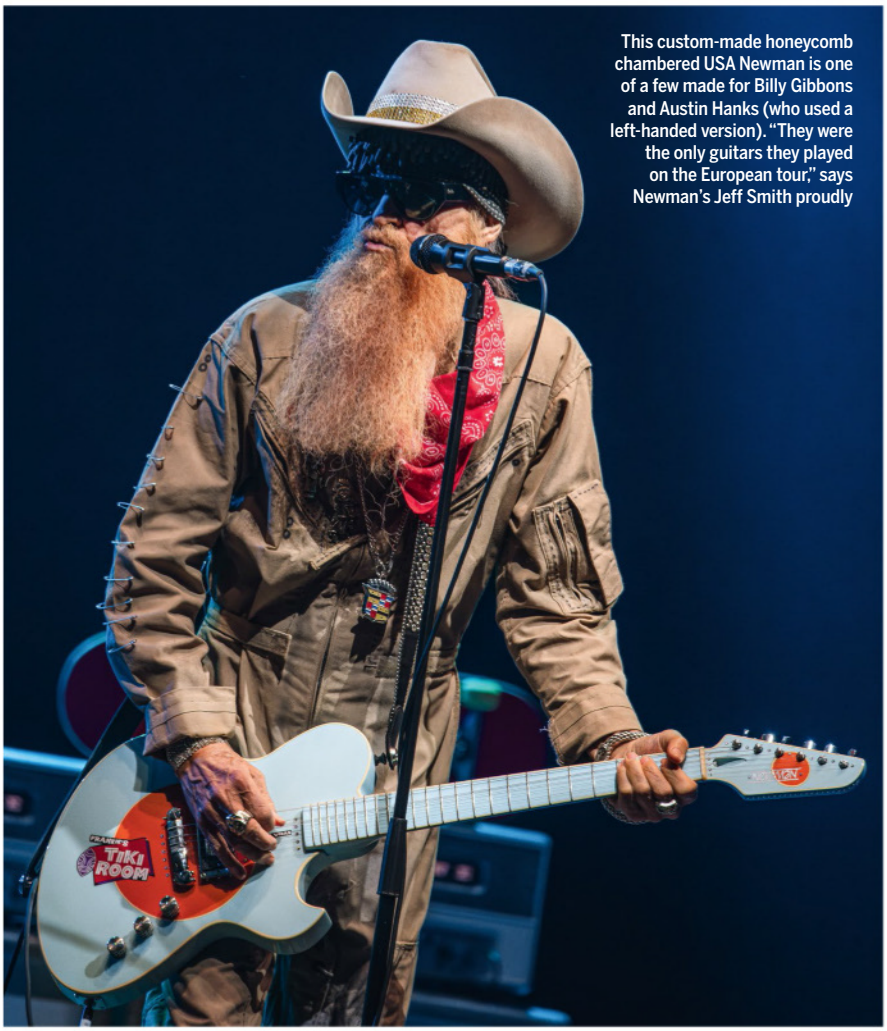
Subsequently, Jeff has been recreating versions of Ted's guitars for the past eight years, but it's not a conventional guitar-making venture. First of all, there's the distinctive design, which itself evolved during the 70s. "Back when Ted was building guitars, they weren't the same, one after another," Jeff tells us. "They were evolving using techniques, tools and machines that he developed. [From that early Keith five-string,] there was the sharp cutaway that he added later in the mid-70s, for example. He evolved that with a bigger, more distinct cutaway to the more refined guitar we're familiar with today. In fact, Ted told me he couldn't get that cutaway right and saw a mayonnaise jar lid on the ground and he literally drew around that!"

Jeff sees the modern Newman as less about the 70s experimentation and more that its starting point is that published blueprint of the five-string. When we reveal we've seen a lot of guitars over the decades, but we've never reviewed a five-string electric guitar, Jeff laughs: "Yes, there are lots of references to five-strings being made by Ted in the late 70s and into the 80s, but I think by then he was really concentrating more on six-strings. He asked me what I thought the demand for a five-string actually was today. I simply replied, 'Where's the five-string to demand?'"

"I believe the [five-string] instrument has great merit," Jeff continues. "Instead of just taking off the low string of a six-string, that's a great way to learn, but I enjoy what I get out of playing a five-string – it seems to be refreshing and has more melodic functions. I also think as people's hands get more stiff with age, it brings some better options. The way we do the neck, it capos beautifully, too, so there are many options. You don't have to buy another guitar, but if you'd like to, we do make them," he laughs.

And in a sea of similarity, the five-string marks Newman out as very different. "I was at a guitar show recently in Indiana and, you know, I was the only guitar maker there with something unique, not my version of a Fender. It was great to know we had the only five-string electric guitar for sale in the whole place! To be uniquely positioned in a crowded space has always been a desire of mine."

All Down The Line

During 2023, the Newman Guitars story took another turn when Cream T's owner, Tim Lobley, announced that a new range would be made here in the UK. "Currently, Jeff's output is something like 30 to 35 instruments a year," Tim told us at the start of the year, "of which a small proportion, maybe three or four, are five-strings. Jeff has been down the route of going to retailers and making a few more guitars at times, but Newman Guitars is mainly an in-house boutique builder. That said, Jeff doesn't make the guitars; they're made in



This custom-made honeycomb chambered USA Newman is one of a few made for Billy Gibbons and Austin Hanks (who used a left-handed version). "They were the only guitars they played on the European tour," says Newman's Jeff Smith proudly

PHOTO BY DAVE HAVLENA ROCK PHOTO

partnership with various USA boutique makers. One [of those makers] might make four or five a year, someone else might make just one.

"So, while the shape does stay the same, the overall output – between those pre-determined boundaries – is actually quite eclectic and that is a function of people custom-ordering them and then different makers custom-making them. Jeff will continue to do that eclectic mix. Our plan is to standardise it a little more. It's an extension of what Jeff has been doing with Newman in the USA; we're just doing it here in the UK on a larger scale."

"Yes, what we do here is totally one-off in most cases," Jeff continues. "That's the way we've always been because we've always been able to sell whatever we build. Several gifted luthiers throughout the USA have built for us including Jacob Harper, Robert Mondell, Saul Koll, Greg Platzer, Chris Morell, Mike Flaherty and Bill Harden. They have all contributed to what they think best represents their vision for what a collaboration with Ted may have looked like. Jacob Harper, however, started working with Ted and I in late December of 2015 and he was a critical part of digitally preserving the design elements that were important to Ted."

> "The [five-string] has great merit… [it's] refreshing and has more melodic functions" ***Jeff Smith***

So when will we see the new UK Newman guitars? And does it mean, after all these decades, that we'll finally get our hands on a five-string? "We have full digital files and rough bodies created," Tim told us in early January. "Once we're back from NAMM we'll see a 'skeleton' guitar for proof of concept. One will come to me, the other will go to Jeff at Newman HQ. We're hoping we'll be 90 per cent there as we're not designing something new. Once we've evaluated that, we'll create what will be a final production prototype, then [it will go] into production. So, although we don't have a guitar in our hands at the moment, we've done the hard work.

"We plan to start with the five-string," Tim continued, "as it's the simplest guitar, a workhorse to launch the concept. Then we should have a version of the guitar Billy Gibbons is playing [pictured above], a honeycomb-chambered single-pickup 'Junior' that we've had a lot of interest in already. Then we're hoping to drop the six-string in the middle and that should be quite straightforward to do."

Cream T will be making the pickups, including those for the five-string, and there's even talk of pickup-swapping versions in the not too distant future.

"You know, after we'd built the first guitar to Ted's specs I showed it to him, he could have just thrown it out the window," Jeff reflects. "Instead, he looked at it and said, 'It's...', and he's spinning it around, 'It's... a Newman!' It was a great moment because it's something we achieved – what his vision really was – within his lifetime and to his approval." G

The UK-made Newman Guitar should be available around April/May. For more information visit www.creamtcustomshop.com

BOUGHT & SOLD

TROY REDFERN

The one-man blues-rock maelstrom recounts the sorry tale of a long-lost Ibanez and reveals a fondness for Gold Foil pickups

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"I had a couple of guitars when I was a teenager, but my dad helped me get me a bank loan for a white Ibanez Universe. I was 17 and I desperately wanted a multi-coloured one when I was a kid. I was a huge fan of [Steve Vai's] *Passion And Warfare*, a complete casualty of that album. I had that guitar for 10 years and loved it and I completely regret selling it, but I kind of moved on musically and felt that it was the wrong instrument. But it was a big mistake, getting rid of it."

What was the last guitar you bought and why?

"The last guitar I bought was a Teisco SSL 4, a '63 – one of the higher-end models back in the day, it has four Gold Foil pickups and a big switching system with six switches. I'm a fan of Gold Foils for recording – to me, they're the best-sounding pickup across the board. And to have all those switching combinations was something I really wanted. It feels great, plays great, has a huge baseball-bat neck, solid mahogany body. Just a really solid instrument. You think of those instruments from the 60s as being kind of weak and a bit lightweight, but this is the exact opposite: it's a heavyweight instrument with fantastic tones."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"There are two things, actually. I bought a Vox AC30 from 1964 and I think that was £300. It was from a friend whose partner had died. She knew it was worth a lot more than that, but she wanted me to have it as a sort of memory of him. Also, I would say, my Silvertone Jupiter, the '62. I bought that about 20 years ago and I think it was about £500 back then. These days, those things can be £1,500 upwards. The prices in the last few years have gone up massively on those old Silvertones. So that was another bargain, back in the day."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"I mentioned buying the Ibanez Universe when I was a kid, but about 10 years later, in about 2000, I decided to part-exchange it for a Fender American Standard Telecaster. And that was just the most soulless, anaemic guitar I think I've ever played. I don't know if it was something to do with [those] guitars around that time, but it had an absolute zero vibe. I don't think [Fender's] standards are like that now, but around the back end of the 90s, early 2000s, I think the guitars were a little bit lacking in mojo."

The 1929 National Triolian resonator (left) is one of Troy's main live guitars, while his 1962 Silvertone Jupiter (right) has been with him for 20 years and was a steal at the time at £500. It's all a far cry from his first Ibanez Universe!

PHOTO BY ROB BLACKHAM

PHOTO BY HALDK GJUREE

"Trying a 50s neck turned me over to baseball-bat necks and changed my whole outlook on guitars"

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go?

"I had a Harmony Stratotone that looks very similar to the Silvertone Jupiter, body shape-wise. It was natural wood, two Gold Foils, and I remember I needed to make a video for a single I had out at the time. This was a long time ago, probably 2016, and I didn't have any money and I felt that the video needed a Gretsch. I don't know why, but I just felt that it was kind of a rockabilly type tune. I looked around and I hadn't used this Harmony for a while and I thought, 'Okay, I'll part-ex that.' That was a big mistake because the Gretsch only lasted maybe a month and I got rid of it.

"Those Harmony instruments from that era had a very distinctive tone in comparison to the Silvertone. I don't know whether it's the way those pickups age over time or something, but there doesn't seem to be a standard tone from those guitars. I think it's quite random. But there was something very different about that one."

TROY'S GO-TO RIG

"I'm using the Magnatone Twilighter Stereo amp, getting the in-house engineers to stereo mic it, which sounds amazing with the tremolo mode that they have on them. I'm still using the resonators, so there's the 1929 National Triolian and the 1935 Dobro M32 as main guitars, and I'm using the Teisco SSL 4 and the Silvertone Jupiter – but there's also a Texas Special Strat that I use for one song. I'm still using the Hermida distortion pedal, which is like a ramped-up version of the Zendrive; because I'm running the amp clean, that's my main gain sound. I like a wet signal, so there are delays and ambiences that I like to have. I'm using a Mu-Tron Phasor II in the front-end at the minute, which is great because it's quite a watery phaser, you know? Very swishy-sounding as opposed to the mid-sounding phasers. That's the current rig, I've kind of pared it down. "When I went out with Philip [Sayce] I took a smaller 'board so there's less on there – there's no wah and I took the Octavia off just to keep it really simple, and it's ended up sticking like that for the last few shows."

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"Personally, I would say – and it's kind of an obvious statement – that you need to try the guitar and physically play it, if possible, to get how the neck feels in your hand. Because, to me, the way your left hand feels on the back of the neck and the fingerboard is everything, you know? The way it feels in your hand is essential for [enabling] a guitar to connect with you. Once, I went to a shop and tried a Gibson Custom Shop R7 [Les Paul] and it had a 50s neck, and from that moment on I was turned over to baseball-bat necks. I absolutely love a huge neck and so going to try that changed my whole outlook on guitars. So I think going somewhere and trying something is the way forward."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online and what were you looking at?

"I got invited to the preview of the new Gibson Garage and while I was down there, I took an Oscar Schmidt acoustic in to be overhauled by a guy who works out of No.Tom [Guitars] in Denmark Street. So I spent some time in Denmark Street looking around and just looking at the huge price tags. But also, in the Gibson showroom it was just absolutely amazing. The sheer quantity of phenomenal guitars at that place was scary – and they were completely fine with you trying stuff out. A lot of the Murphy Lab stuff felt amazing, but, in fact, I think I veered more to just a straightforward Custom Shop than the Murphy Lab stuff, to be honest."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp, or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"I would say a great amp and a cheapish guitar because that's what I've got. And, even though the prices of these guitars are silly, they're basically cheap guitars. I've also got the Magnatone Twilighter Stereo amp and anything through that sounds amazing, you know? I think a few years ago I might have said the opposite, but now I think if you have a great amp you can plug pretty much anything into it – as long as the pickups are working, it's gonna sound great."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"Personally, I love Gold Foils or lipstick pickups for recording, but if I had to I would choose humbuckers and get a coil tap so I have the best of both worlds!" **[DM]**

Troy Redfern's new album, *Invocation*, is set for release by RED7 records on 17 May. Troy's headline UK tour runs from 17 to 27 June
https://troyredfern.com

The newest addition to Troy's guitar collection is this switch-laden 1963 Teisco SSL 4, featuring four Gold Foil pickups, a huge neck and solid mahogany body

PHOTO BY JASON BRIDGES

The MOD SQUAD

THE NUMBERS GAME

It's over 30 years since Yamaha's huge-selling Pacifica 112 changed the low-end guitar world and became a near-perfect modding platform. Dave Burrluck pays homage

Yamaha first released the Pacifica in 1990, designed in the company's then-new R&D centre (Yamaha Guitar Development) in Hollywood. Named after a city above San Francisco, the Pacifica and its sibling the Weddington – the less-successful, more Les Paul-inspired model that was named after the street address of the facility – were the fledgling team's attempt to show Yamaha HQ what they could do in the USA.

Ex-Ibanez designer Rich Lasner had joined Yamaha. "He was only with us for about two years," said Ken Dapron, who managed the facility, back in 2003. "He was also the original designer of the Pacifica. I wouldn't say [the model was] sole-designed; it was a group effort," something that also included luthier Leo Knapp.

"The Pacifica and Weddington were designed alongside each other – the two mainstream sides of the guitar spectrum," said Ken. "Our plan was to stoke up the market with these high-end prototypes and show them to artists, but they were such an instant hit." And they quickly led

> "The 112's calling card was its solid body at a time when low-end bolt-ons favoured plywood"

to numerous production models: "The Pacifica 1412 set-neck, tone chambered with a retail of $1,999. Then the 912 was the next model down at $999, then the 712 at $699, then the 412 came later at $599. Then the 500 series – all in the early 90s with the 300 coming in 1994 in the US market."

If these upper-level Pacificas aimed to push guitar development further forwards, the lowly 112 – which launched in 1993 – attacked the low-end mass market with considerable success. "It was really just price point," said Ken, "to get down to where all the volume sales were. But while we knocked the spec down we wanted to keep quality as high as we could. [They were] always made in Taiwan until the last couple of years from Indonesia; some finishes are still made in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Over 10 years in the UK we've sold about 60,000. Worldwide, 25,000 to 30,000 per year. By far and away the biggest-selling Yamaha electric guitar... by quite a margin! Outside of the classics, it has to be one of the most popular electrics ever." And that was 20 years ago.

Aside from its place in the starter market, the 112 was a near-perfect guitar to make your own and modify and, hopefully, learn a bit about how guitars work. In fact, back in 2007, Yamaha donated four 112s to myself and then-*Guitarist* staff Mick Taylor, Neville Marten and Simon Bradley to modify.

Originally, the 112's calling card (apart from the fact it was a stylish modern take on the Stratocaster, of course) was its solid body at a time when many (or even most) low-end bolt-ons favoured plywood. However, perhaps in an effort to engage younger players, the neck width was on the smaller side, too. Clearing out *Guitarist*'s gear-storage bat cave a while back we found a long-forgotten 112 needing a home, an original from 2002 according to the stamped serial number on the back of the headstock. This was before the 2007-introduced 112V changed the scratchplate to the smaller version with rear-mounted controls.

A Closer Look

Okay, it's not as if we've uncovered a vintage Fender from the 50s in the wardrobe, but even in its pared down form the 112 has a touch of class about it. The solid alder body is clearly visible in its light natural finish, which is far from over-glossed. You can see that it's made from four pieces, and it has an overall weight of 3.18kg (7lb), far from a guitar-shaped boat anchor. Exactly what history this one has had, I have no idea... other than the previous user has added some stickers to the body, the bridge humbucker has lost its treble-side adjustment screw, the volume control is sailing in the wind, the output jack has lost its retaining nut and there are no strings attached [pics 1 & 2]. Stickers aside, there are a few dings and marks to the finish but no major bashes. A quick glance down the darkly striped rosewood fingerboard and no alarm bells go off.

Now to the elephant in the room. The 112 has a pretty narrow neck; it always did and it still does. The nut width is spec'd by Yamaha at 41mm (with a 12th-fret width of 51.4mm). The same width is used by Yamaha on all of its Pacifica models, apart from the newly released Professional and Pacifica Standard Plus models, which up that width to 42mm (with a 52.4mm width at the 12th fret).

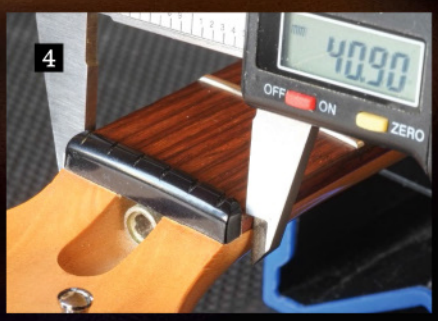
Of the past 300 or so guitars, old and new, that I've evaluated (and measured), not one has had exactly a 41mm nut width, but plenty lie between 41mm and 42mm: from a 1976 Guild S-90 (41.5mm), early 50s Fenders, a Broadcaster (41.6mm) and a Telecaster (41.5mm), and a 2006 Rickenbacker 620 (41.84mm), to the more modern Music Man Cutlass (41.3mm), EVH Wolfgang Special (41.5mm) and PRS's Silver Sky (Maple) 2021 (41.63mm). Don't forget, half a millimetre is just the equivalent of 0.0197 inches, call it 0.020 inches, slightly thicker than the diameter of your G string. But while Yamaha's neck width is dimensionally unusual today, it certainly has historic precedence: around 1965 Gibson's nut width changed from 1 11/16-inch (42.9mm) to 1 9/16-inch (39.7mm) and stayed that way until the end of the decade.

Depth-wise, the Yamaha spec quotes 20.9mm at the 1st fret and 22.9mm at the 12th; the new Pacifica models trim that subtly to 20mm at the 1st fret and 22.4mm by the 12th fret. Plenty of 'thinner' necks have similar 20mm to 23mm depths.

What isn't quoted is the important and overlooked string spacing at the nut, which on our mutt measures 34mm (like that Rickenbacker 620) [pic 3]. The industry standard is between 34mm and 36mm, so when people bemoan a narrow neck that they can't possibly play, the *actual* string

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

After years in a cupboard, the 20-something Yamaha 112 is now fit for new adventures

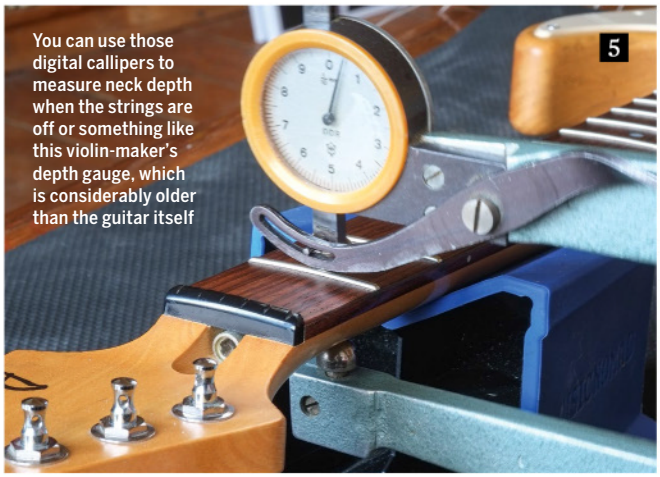


1. The alder-bodied Pacifica 112...

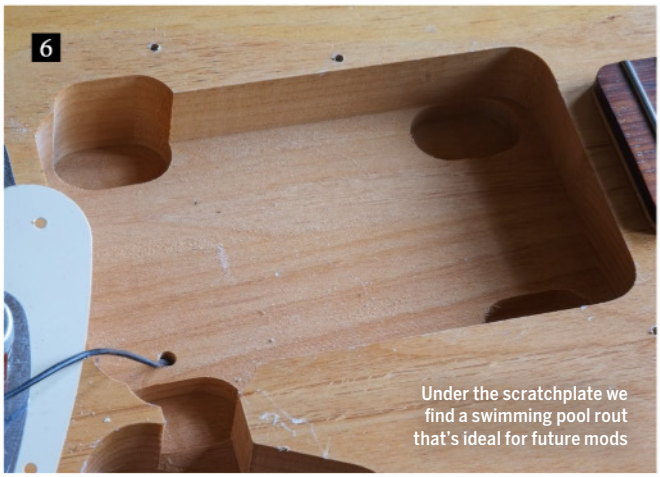
2. ...with plenty of sticker action!

3. Measuring the actual string spacing at the nut

4. Quite often you'll find the actual measurement of the nut width is marginally different from the quoted specification



You can use those digital callipers to measure neck depth when the strings are off or something like this violin-maker's depth gauge, which is considerably older than the guitar itself



Under the scratchplate we find a swimming pool rout that's ideal for future mods

spacing might well be the same as, well, a guitar with a wider nut width that they can play. We're a strange bunch.

String spacing at the bridge is spec'd at 10.5mm, which multiplied by five gives us the actual string spread of 52.5mm – pretty much the modern industry standard spacing as used by PRS, for example, and sitting between the original Gibson standard of 50mm and the wider Fender spacing of 55mm.

But a specification is just that. The *actual* guitar might well differ, which is why I personally measure every guitar that I evaluate on our review pages. For example, the actual nut width of this 112 is 40.9mm [pic 4]; 51.28mm wide at the 12th. In depth it's 20.55mm at the 1st fret and 22.39mm by the 12th [pic 5] with what I'd call quite a full-shouldered 'C' profile. The fingerboard radius is spec'd at 350mm (13.78 inches), a good fit for my StewMac 14-inch radius gauge.

Restoration Time

Many of us mod guitars just for the hell of it, don't we? I could certainly chuck out all the generic parts here and retool the 112, probably at a greater cost than I'd spend finding a whole fit-for-purpose 112 on eBay. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, and that was pretty much what I did in that previous feature back in 2007; that modded guitar, by the way, is still in use with a guitar-playing neighbour. Another neighbour had asked if I had any recommendations for her early teenage daughter who'd been having acoustic guitar lessons, was doing well, but fancied putting a finger or two into the electric realm. Bingo! I had a plan: restore the 112 to good playing condition and put it back into good use.

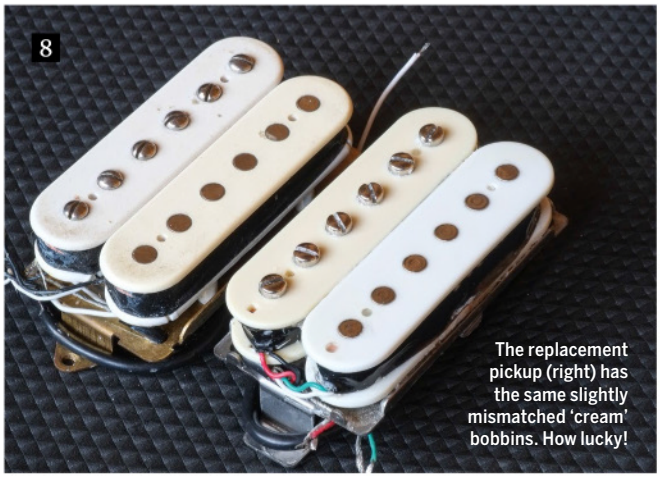
So, maybe the first thing I should do is clean it up a bit, fix the volume control and output jack, string up and have a feel and listen? That said, removing the scratchplate I find an open 'swimming pool' rout [pic 6] with space for a neck humbucker (or a soapbar P-90), although I'd need another scratchplate – already I'm thinking of the modding potential. But, hang on, I'm sticking to plan A and instead I tighten up the loose volume pot nut and add one to the output jack. To be fair, the simple circuit all looks okay, certainly good enough to check the sounds.

Removing the stickers requires a bit of patience. A couple applied here were

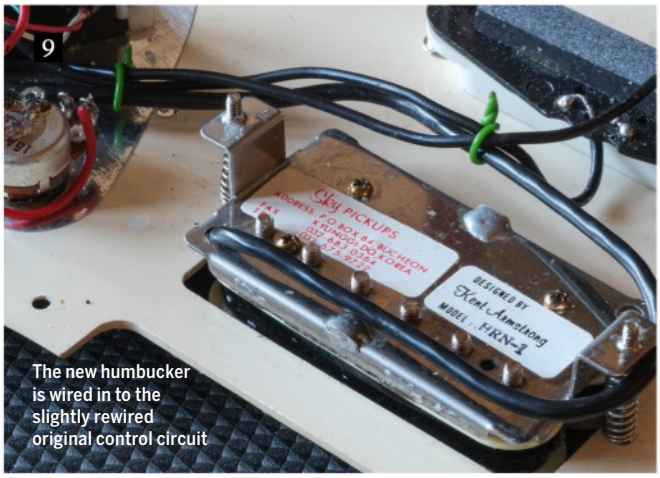
After soaking the paper sticker you can slowly scrape it off with a flexible plastic card

the vinyl types, which pull off easily. The others are the laminated paper, which require more effort to remove. I pull off as much of the top layer as I can then soak the area with methylated spirits and, using a fingernail and/or an old credit card as a 'soft' scraper, I'm able to get them off without doing any harm [pic 7].

Okay, we're ready to string up, but before I do that I plug in and test the pickups – just by lightly tapping or scraping a small

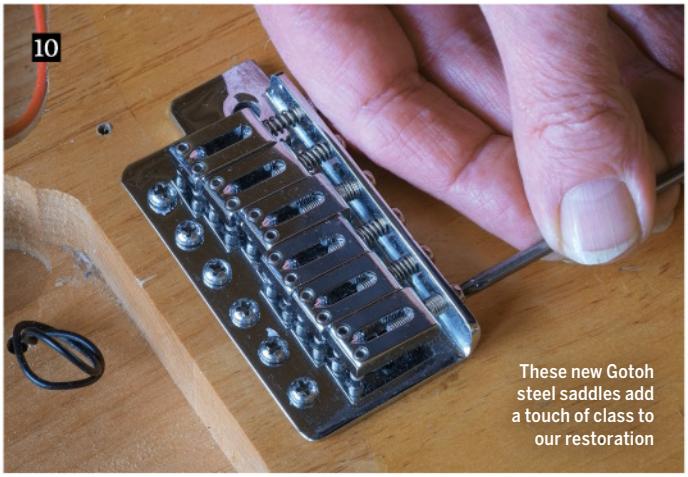


The replacement pickup (right) has the same slightly mismatched 'cream' bobbins. How lucky!

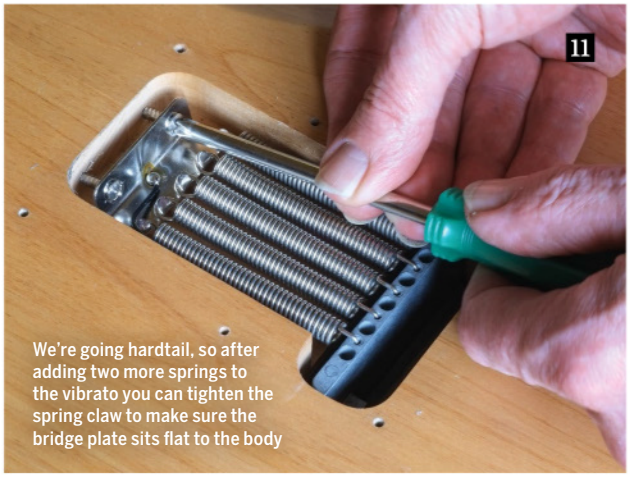


The new humbucker is wired in to the slightly rewired original control circuit

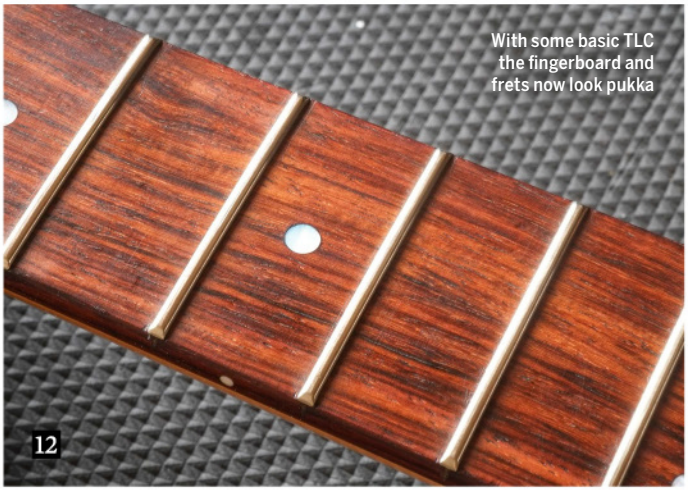
PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK



These new Gotoh steel saddles add a touch of class to our restoration



We're going hardtail, so after adding two more springs to the vibrato you can tighten the spring claw to make sure the bridge plate sits flat to the body



With some basic TLC the fingerboard and frets now look pukka

Always check that the large tuner nuts are tight, as well as the screws that hold the tuner buttons in place. We're now ready to restring and check the setup

screwdriver over the relevant pickup's polepieces. Instead of finding everything ship-shape, the neck pickup isn't working, the bridge humbucker seems very quiet, and the middle pickup is voiced only when the five-way pickup selector is in 'neck' position. Oh dear.

Using a multimeter set to 20kohms and checking that humbucker, only one coil is working. Both single coils read approximately 5.7k to 5.9k, and although they're the cheapo types with a rear-placed ceramic magnet, they'll do for now. Meanwhile, I have a root around the bitsbox and find a Sky/Kent Armstrong HRN-1 humbucker. At some point I'd cut off the cover, so it just pulls off revealing double cream bobbins – the first piece of luck I've had! Actually, even more like the Yamaha pickup, the bobbins are slightly different 'cream' colours [pic 8 & 9]. It's the same magnet polarity as the Yamaha pickup, too, and after checking the colour codes online I wire that in and resolder the two single coils correctly on the moulded five-way switch. After another tap test plugged in hopefully we're now good to go.

The bridge has pressed steel saddles and a tapered die-cast block that could easily be changed, but I have a set of Gotoh block steel saddles from a previous job so I fit those [pic 10]. As the guitar is going to a young student I decide to set the vibrato as a hardtail, flat to the body, so I just add another two springs and tighten the spring claw [pic 11], then she can get her whammy chops in place at a later stage.

On checking the neck for straightness with a straight edge, I find that it needs a slight truss rod tightening tweak. I then do a very basic clean up, much like our nylon-string last issue: remove a few sharp fret ends with a small file, 600-grit on a flat wood block across the fret tops, a good rub with the same grade paper along the edges, then a vigorous rub with 0000 wire wool across the frets and fingerboard face. It looks good, so I decide just to polish up the fret tops and give the nice-looking fingerboard a rub with fingerboard oil [pic 12]. A quick check that the tuner nuts and buttons are tight [pic 13], then I string up and see what we've got.

> "With only a little restoration work, this 21-year-old 112 reminds me what all the fuss was about"

With only a little restoration work, this 21-year-old 112 reminds me what all the fuss was about. It might be a lowly piece, but it's extremely well made – from the tight-tolerance machining to the neck pocket, and the good medium jumbo fretwire with plenty of height on a real quality-looking piece of rosewood. The neck is as straight as the day it was made and, unusually for the style, can be set up without a neck shim. Even the neck screws push through the body, as they should, screwing only into the neck itself.

After dialling in the new saddles it plays really well. Not everyone will enjoy the narrow neck, but you do get used to it pretty quickly. I think I might reposition the string tree closer to the nut as the back angle is quite shallow, and I'd be tempted to add another to the G and D string. Easily done. Hardly modding, this exercise in maintenance will mean there's no reason this 112 can't be used for a few more decades to come.

Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

Do we need to think about tuners, so long as they work and the guitar stays in tune?

Machineheads

For guitar players, bassists and players of pretty much any stringed instrument, tuners are just a fact of life. Off the top of our heads, the only stringed instrument without tuners that we can think of is a tea-chest bass. Some players express strong tuner preferences based on functionality, weight and appearance. Among vintage guitar collectors, a changed set of tuners can be a dealbreaker, Schallers on a vintage Gibson being a particular *bête noire* for some.

It's pretty clear what tuners do. On instruments such as guitar and bass, the strings are stretched between two fixed points and the tuner sets the pitch of the open string by applying tension. Increasing this tension raises the pitch; decreasing it lowers the pitch. Friction pegs are still used throughout the violin family and are one of the features that differentiate traditional flamenco guitars from 'classical' guitars. This is why some still use the archaic term 'peg head', rather than 'headstock'.

The operating principle couldn't be simpler. Carved from hardwoods, with a button or key at one end, each tapered peg is wedged into a hole in the headstock with a matching taper. On guitars, the button end is located at the back of the headstock and the thin end protrudes through the front, with a hole drilled through it for attaching a string. Although it must be able to turn, a friction peg has to fit snugly into the headstock so that the friction resists string tension.

Friction pegs have a 1:1 ratio, which means that one complete turn of the key results in one string wrap around the peg. This rudimentary design makes accurate tuning very difficult, so some string players and flamenco guitarists are now using Wittner Finetune Pegs, with gears stealthily concealed inside the keys.

Gearing Up

Steel strings present greater challenges for tuning accuracy and stability than gut or nylon strings, so you might think that geared mechanical tuners are a relatively recent development. But metal tuners actually originated in the mid-1700s and a viol and guitar maker called John Frederick Hintz has been credited with the first design. Others mention an English guitar and cittern maker called John Preston, who designed a tuning system based on bolts and hooks that can still be seen on Portuguese Fado guitars.

These designs were the precursors of the machineheads that we use today. Compared with earlier versions, the modern style of tuner is compact, elegant and efficient. But whether it's a three-on-a-plate set fitted to an 1800s Martin or a brand-new set on a PRS, they all operate in the same way.

This 1958 Les Paul Custom features Grover Rotomatic tuners, which first appeared on the model in that same year. The previous year had Kluson units

Whether it's a three-on-a-plate set fitted to an 1800s Martin or a brand-new set on a PRS, guitar tuners all operate in the same way

The post of the tuner is the long section that has a string hole and it protrudes through the front of the headstock, and a pinion gear is attached to the bottom of the post. This meshes with a worm gear that is part of the shaft that the button is attached to. The button makes it possible to turn the mechanism by hand, and a bushing on the headstock face keeps the post aligned and prevents it from leaning under string tension.

Tuners that are designed for classical guitars and slot-headed steel-string acoustics are slightly different because the post holes are drilled through the sides of the headstock, rather than front to back. The post for a tuner of this sort is flat all the way along, and since it presses into a blind hole on the inner side of the slot, there's no need for a bushing.

Some express strong preferences based on functionality, weight and appearance. Among vintage collectors, a changed set of tuners can be a dealbreaker

Golden Ratio

As we mentioned earlier, when a 360-degree turn of the tuner button results in a 360-degree post rotation, the tuner has a 1:1 ratio. The use of two gears in modern tuners means that designers can engineer various ratios for finer control. For instance, vintage Kluson tuners have a 12:1 ratio and require 12 button revolutions for each post revolution. Some of the Kluson reissues now have a 14:1 ratio or even an 18:1 ratio. Ratios of 28:1 or even higher are available from other manufacturers, and Graph Tech's Ratio set optimises the ratios for individual strings. These range from 12:1 to 39:1 with higher ratios used for the lower strings and lower ratios used for the plain strings.

While higher ratios facilitate precision tuning, the downside is that bringing new strings up to concert pitch takes longer. Investing in a button winder is advisable to speed up string changes.

High-ratio tuners, such as this proprietary Godin design (18:1 on the bass side, 26:1 on the treble), offer finer control

Getting Greasy

Over the decades, vast numbers of vintage guitars have had their original tuners removed and replaced. Often the tuners would have been worn out and players were obliged to use whatever replacements were available in the 70s and 80s. But this usually meant widening post holes and adding screw holes. Perfectly viable tuners were often blamed for tuning instability issues that were more likely a result of badly slotted nuts and poorly maintained vibratos.

Older-style open-geared tuners sometimes stiffen up to the point where they're barely usable. Without a cover to protect the workings, they are particularly vulnerable to dirt and dust, but they can often be refurbished. Once they're removed from the guitar, try loosening the screw that secures the post gear and dismantle the tuner. Soak the parts in naphtha for a few hours and then scrub them down with an old toothbrush to remove any debris. When reassembling the tuner, apply silicone grease wherever parts move against each other. But don't use too much because it will create a mess and may end up soaking into the wood if it melts. Give the tuner several turns to work the grease in before fitting the tuners back onto the guitar.

With closed-back Kluson-style tuners, the process is similar. After leaving them to soak in naphtha, use a syringe to inject clean naphtha through the lubrication hole and flush out the housings. You'll be amazed at the amount of dirt, old grease and metal particles that comes out. Once the tuners have drained off and dried thoroughly, squirt a smallish amount of silicone grease onto the gears via the lubrication hole; work it into the mechanism and reinstall the tuners.

Die-cast tuners, as they are known, are intended to completely seal the gear mechanism and protect it from contaminants. They can be very long-lasting, but the grease may eventually solidify and adversely affect performance. Most can be dismantled, cleaned and lubricated, and tutorial videos are easy to find online. If you discover that nylon washers have degraded or gone missing, you will need to source some replacements.

These Graph Tech Ratio tuners use different gear ratios on each string to give a smooth, balanced feel. They're rear locking, too

> The use of two gears in modern tuners means that designers can engineer various ratios for finer control

Attachment Issues

Everybody has their own preferred method of securing strings to posts. Some do one wrap over the top of the hole and several

The Grover Sta-Tite tuners update the classic open-gear design and feature a die-cast plate

beneath, while others just wrap below. Many tuner posts taper down towards the hole, which encourages the string wraps to bunch tightly together when tension is applied. The infamous 'luthier's knot' is said to guarantee stable tuning, but you may find it offers no improvement. Instead, it merely complicates string changes while making it more likely you'll poke holes in your fingers when you're attempting to untie the knot.

The Kluson tuners that Fender used in the 50s and 60s had posts with a hole through the centre that were split at the top. This continued through the 70s with the 'F' stamped tuners that Schaller manufactured for Fender. The string threads into the hole, is bent over to exit through the slot and then wraps around the post. This design makes string changes quick and easy. You can also wrap the string around the post several times to optimise the break angle over the nut, which helps open strings to ring clearly when the headstock has no back angle.

The 'locking tuner' design that Sperzel introduced during the 70s is almost as fast as Fender's method and tightly secures strings. A thumbscrew located on the back of the gear housing opens and closes a clamp that's built into the tuner post. Simply thread the string through the post hole, pull it tight and lock the string in position. You may find the string only needs half a turn around the post before it reaches pitch.

Weighting For Tone

Another rationale for replacing lightweight Kluson tuners on vintage guitars with die-cast tuners was the belief that adding mass to a headstock enhances sustain. Whatever you might think of the practice, it cannot be denied that most of the iconic 'Burst players used Grovers or Schallers. Then again, vintage Les Pauls tend to have otherworldly sustain irrespective of the tuners.

PRS's Paul Reed Smith has expressed a preference for lighter tuners, arguing that heavy tuners dampen dynamics. This may explain why so many PRS guitars feature lightweight tuner buttons to lighten the load. The other downside of die-cast tuners is that there is a tendency towards neck heaviness – and therefore swapping to wood or plastic buttons may help.

High-quality vintage reissue tuners are readily available and many vintage guitar owners are now choosing to restore their guitars to original specs. Conversion bushings can be used to conceal oversized post holes, which means there's no need to plug and redrill them.

Robot Wars

Powered machineheads that automatically tune your guitar may sound appealing, and in recent years several companies have developed viable systems. Jimmy Page endorsed the AxCent Tuning Systems and Trevor Wilkinson designed the ATD HT440. German company Tronical entered into an ill-fated deal with the tech-obsessed titans that formerly ran Gibson, but its Min-ETune-equipped guitars failed to convince the guitar-playing public. With accurate electronic tuning aids that can be clamped to headstocks, built into acoustic preamps or placed on pedalboards, surely there's no need for robotic tuners? All you need are ears, eyes and fingers – long live the machinehead, we say. G

www.huwpriceguitar.com

PRS's Phase III locking tuners are 'tweaked' with small screws on the tuner collars for improved string vibration and resonance

Without a cover to protect the workings, older-style open-geared tuners are vulnerable to dirt

Coneheads

Over the past few years, speakers with a hemp cone have increased in popularity. Paul Gough of Zilla Cabs discusses their distinctive sound

Since I started writing these articles I haven't talked much about the individual parts of a speaker and largely skipped over most of how a speaker (or driver) actually works. As we're going to be looking at speaker cones in this article it may be smart to explain roughly how this part of the speaker functions. The cone (named after its conical shape, a tube wider at one end than the other) is attached to the speaker chassis at the larger end in a way that allows it to move when a force is applied at the thinner end. The idea of a speaker driver is largely that the cone can move freely when a force is applied before returning to its initial position, but done in a single motion, so that the cone itself doesn't change shape. In turn, this creates pressure waves in the surrounding air and lets us hear an acoustic representation of the electrical signal that was applied to the speaker. This is called pistonic motion, and if truly allowed to happen, with the cone not changing shape, should allow for a pure replication of the original signal from your amp and avoid any unwanted distortion.

Now, we are all guitarists and most of us have no problem whatsoever with distortion. In fact, most of us actively seek it out, often in its most primitive and least scientific forms. It therefore will come as little surprise to know that a guitar speaker's cone doesn't move uniformly. Those of us who have recorded a speaker will know how audible the difference is when placing two mics at the exact same points on a driver but 180 degrees apart – as in top and bottom. This is why placing a mic over where the solder lugs are will produce a quite different, often nicer sound than the exact place on the other side of the dust cap. In the 80s, Celestion famously used Doppler interferometry to measure how the Alnico Blue cone moved and subsequently applied this to a new model, the Vintage 30.

Of course, the use of different materials will affect the sound, too. In the pro audio and hi-fi world more uniform materials are preferred, often ones that are more resistant to moisture. But for guitar speakers, paper is the material of choice. There are, however, a growing number of speakers that utilise speaker cones made from hemp: Celestion has its Hempback, Eminence has the Cannabis Rex, there's Tonespeak's New Orleans, and Weber has a few hemp-cone options, too. But the first company that springs to mind when I think of hemp cones is Tone Tubby. I first heard about the brand in an early 2000s issue of this very magazine, which had an Alnico shootout featuring Tone Tubby's famous Alnico Red. Since then I've had the privilege to play many (although sadly not most) of its extensive range, which is exclusively based around hemp cones. And to vouch further for these speakers' pedigree, artists including Derek Trucks, Santana and Steve Morse have all played through the company's wares.

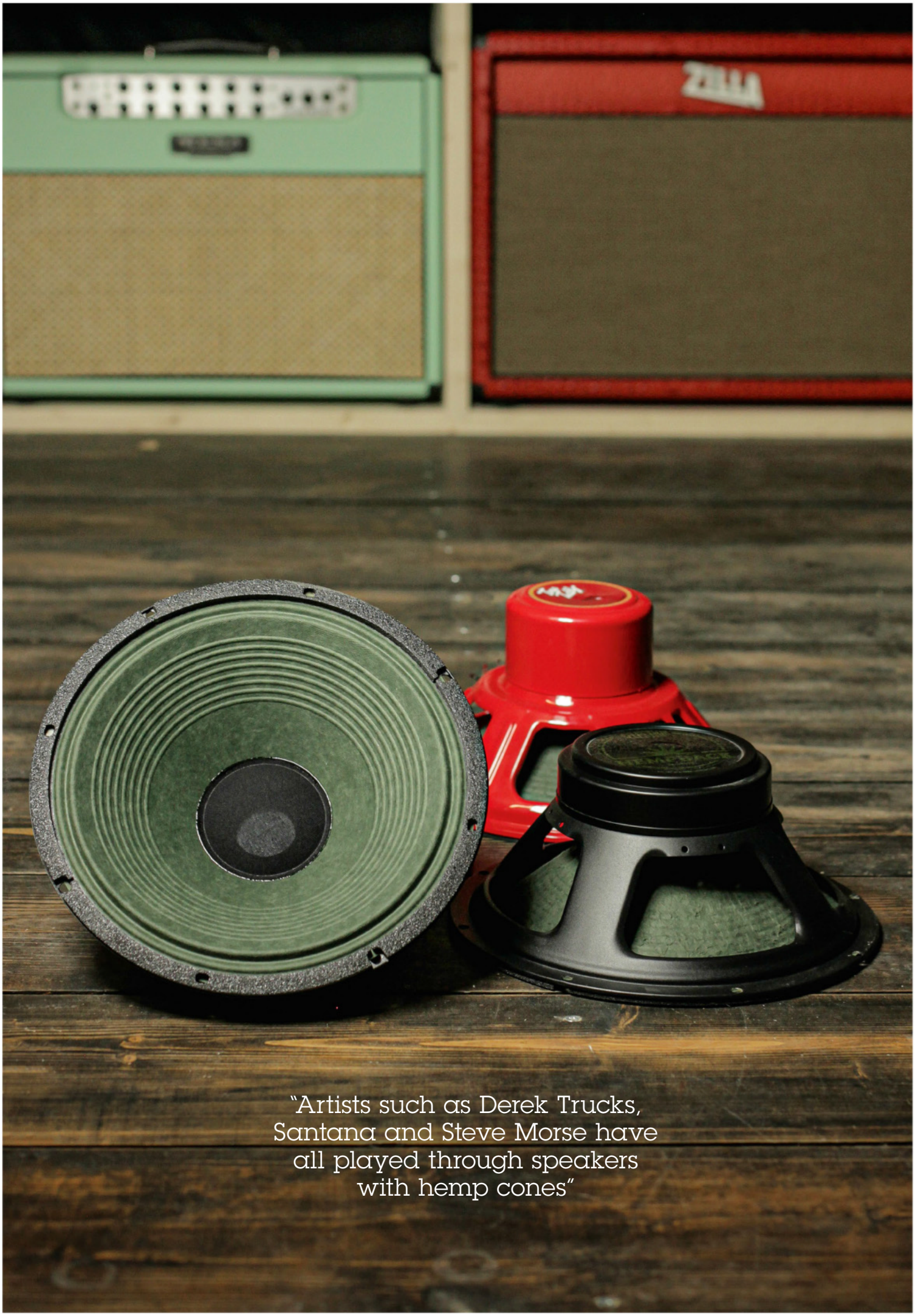
So, what do they sound like? An online search of these speakers brings up talk of warm, smooth, organic tones, but in my experience hemp cones do tend to have some striking resemblances to each other, mostly that they are relatively dark sounding. Now, dark is generally something I lean away from myself, but I have to admit they can be really useful when trying to tame some top-end. If you get it right, they can be a really useful tool in open-back cabs when trying to get some ambience, but they also smooth out some brightness – and this is why you'll often see them as a replacement in combos, in particular those from Fender.

> "Hemp cones tend to be relatively dark sounding, which can help tame some top-end brightness"

Hemp-cone speakers, including Celestion's Hempback (front) and Tone Tubby's range (back), pair nicely with open-backed cabs

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZILLA CABS

So, if you've noticed the increasing number of hemp-cone speakers out there and wondered what all the fuss was about, here's your push to give them a go. I will end with a piece of advice, though: although most speakers benefit from some bedding in time, from my experience hemp-cone speakers are notorious for taking many hours to come to life. So if you try them, make sure you give them time to show you their true colours. It may just be worth the wait. G



"Artists such as Derek Trucks, Santana and Steve Morse have all played through speakers with hemp cones"

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Snowy White & Peter Green

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs SSC & Vox AC15
Difficulty ★★★☆☆ | 10 mins per example

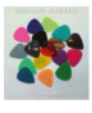
Snowy White's '57 Les Paul Goldtop served him from its purchase in '68 until its auction in 2015

PHOTO BY SIMON LEES/FUTURE/GUITARIST

TERENCE 'SNOWY' WHITE and his Les Paul Goldtop travelled widely in the music business, from London-based sessions to stints with Pink Floyd and Thin Lizzy, plus his own solo hit single, *Bird Of Paradise*, in the early 1980s. However, the focus of this feature is Snowy's collaboration with Peter Green, who had become a close friend as well as a major influence. In the late 1970s, Snowy played lead on several tracks for Peter's *In The Skies* album, doing an incredible job of channeling his minimalist phrasing on tracks such as *Slabo Day*, which inspired my own backing track and example solo.

The essence here is on delivering each note with as much melodic intention as possible, as opposed to being purely pattern-based and 'methodical', which can be all too easy to slip into when playing from the minor pentatonic 'boxes'. There are occasions where I add in a couple of non-pentatonic notes, but these are few and far between. Details such as bends and vibrato are where most of the effort goes in soloing like this; for example, the use of pre-bends with vibrato, which tend towards a controlled 'down and back' approach, rather than the wider wobble favoured by SRV.

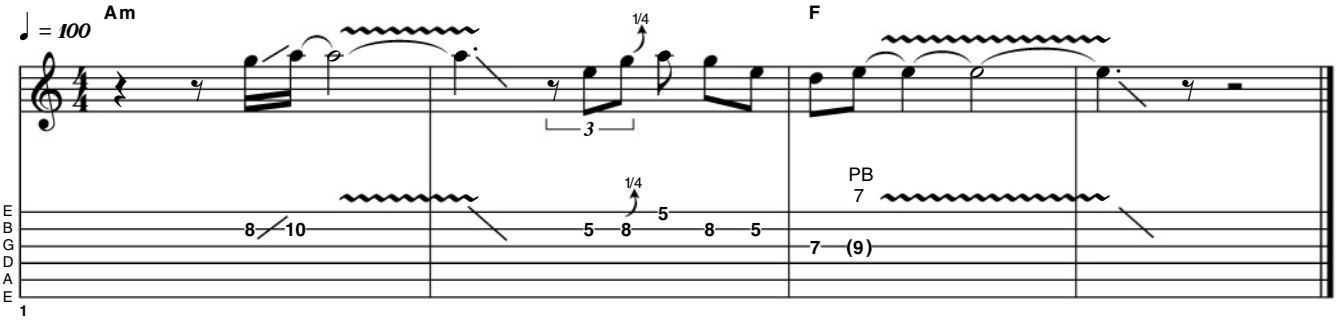
Having a guitar wired for the classic out-of-phase sound is nice if you have the option, but it's not essential. No specialist amplification or pedals are needed, either – just a hint of break-up and some reverb to taste. Though I've played the solo as a continuous take, it's broken up into four phrases here in print. I've instinctively started low then gone high, but over the course of a longer solo, mixing and matching different registers (or even taking the opposite approach) could also work. I hope you enjoy these ideas and see you next time!



Richard Barrett's album, *Colours* (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

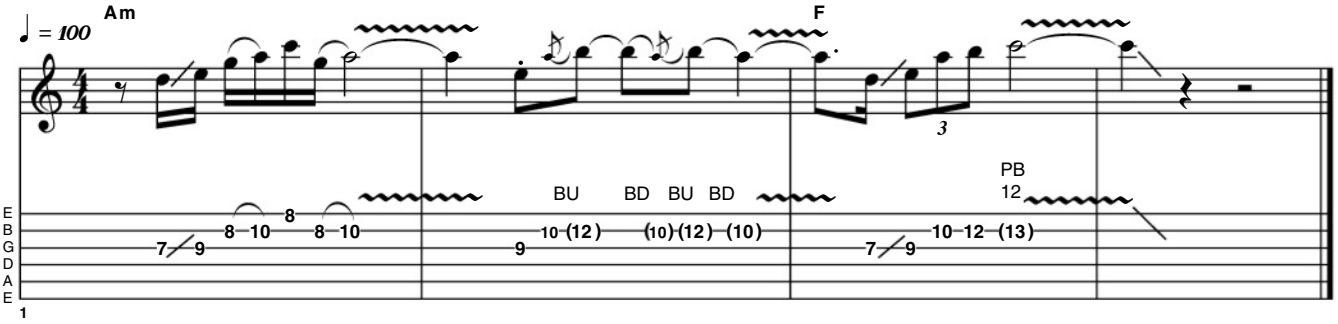
Example 1

PART OF THE LAID-BACK FEEL in this first example is created by not leaping in on beat 1, bar 1. Neither of the two phrases that make up this example are in any hurry at all, and when they do come in, they pull back somewhat from the tempo. As with anything, this can be overdone, but it is definitely something to bear in mind as you work through the examples. Note the pre-bend with 'down and back' vibrato at the end.



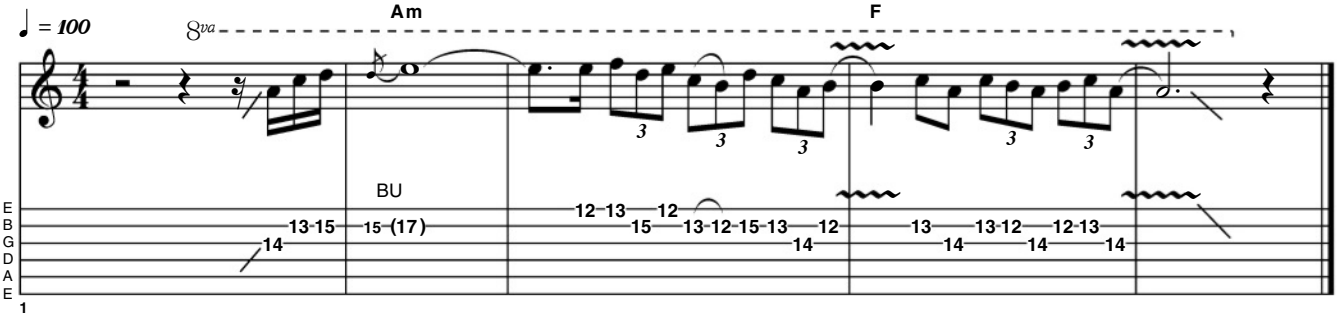
Example 2

IN THIS SECOND PHRASE, there's still no rush to 'front and centre'. We're clearly using shapes from the A minor pentatonic, but you'll notice the bend to B in bar 2; this implies A minor 9 when played over the A minor in the backing track. The intention here isn't to make anything more complex, it's just a nice place to go that isn't too predictable. After a shift in position (to A minor pentatonic shape 3), there's another B, bending up to C over the F chord.



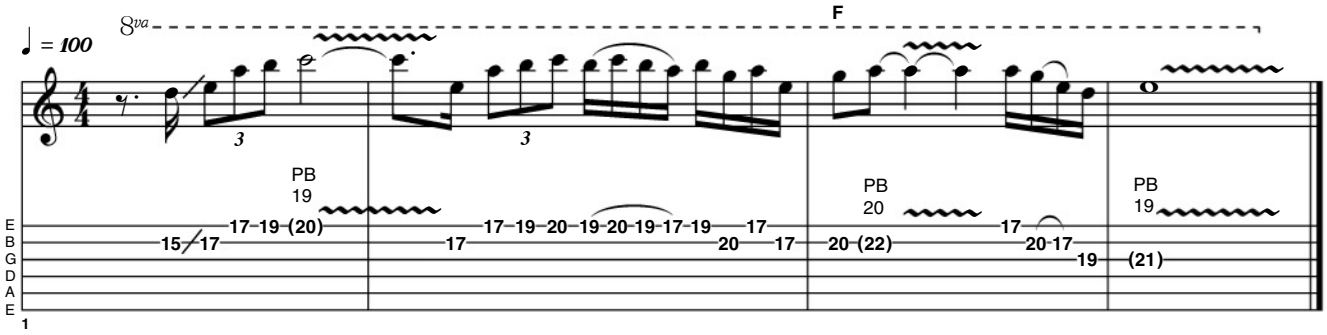
Example 3

AS THE SOLO PROGRESSES, enough momentum builds that this phrase starts ahead of the bar. It's based around the A minor pentatonic shape 4, but the inclusion of B and F takes us outside this a little, too. After the bend to E near the beginning, there is a distinct lack of typically blues traits, playing a straight melody in and around the pentatonic shape. Note that although this is all 'quantised' for the sake of transcription and reading, so many key moments here are played slightly behind the beat.



Example 4

THIS FINAL EXAMPLE USES the shape 1 A minor pentatonic, 12 frets/an octave up from where we began in Example 1. We're also revisiting some very similar ideas (although they can sound very different in this register), such as using pre-bends and carefully controlled vibrato, plus pulling back from the beat. This 'off-grid' timing isn't as easy or second nature as it might seem, though it eventually becomes part of your repertoire unconsciously – as long as you don't overthink it!



Hear It Here

PETER GREEN
IN THE SKIES

On the album's opener, the Santana-style title track, you can hear Peter's phrases weaving in and out of the mix between his distinctive vocals. He takes more of a front seat in *Funky Chunky*, though doesn't stray too far from the main melodic figure. However, there are a few very nice embellishments worth noticing. On *Slabo Day*, the inspiration for the example solo and backing track, Snowy White is in great form, building the dynamic throughout. An additional mention should be made of Snowy's phrasing here: it's beautifully spacey and atmospheric in equal measure.

JOHN MAYALL
A HARD ROAD

Taking the guitar chair after Eric Clapton's departure, Peter surprised and delighted many with his beautifully phrased solos and melodic lines. Have a listen to *The Super-Natural* (later covered by Gary Moore on *Blues For Greeny*) and, well, check out that sustain... *The Stumble* is a much more Clapton-esque affair, demonstrating that Peter – unlike the majority of his contemporaries – could conjure up this feel, too, when needed. *Some Day After A While (You'll Be Sorry)* features Peter playing quite aggressively over a *Need Your Love So Bad*-style chord progression.

SNOWY WHITE
WHITE FLAMES

Having completed stints with Pink Floyd and Thin Lizzy, Snowy took the opportunity to record his first solo album, ready for release in 1983. Although it bears some of the noted production and stylistic hallmarks of the era, the guitar playing comes straight from the blues. A good example of this can be heard on *Lucky Star*, which features plenty of nimble blues playing over a Latin/fusion-style backing. Next up is the hit single *Bird Of Paradise*, with *Little Wing*-style doublestops and a more driven tone on the solo. Finally, check out *The Journey – Part One*.

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